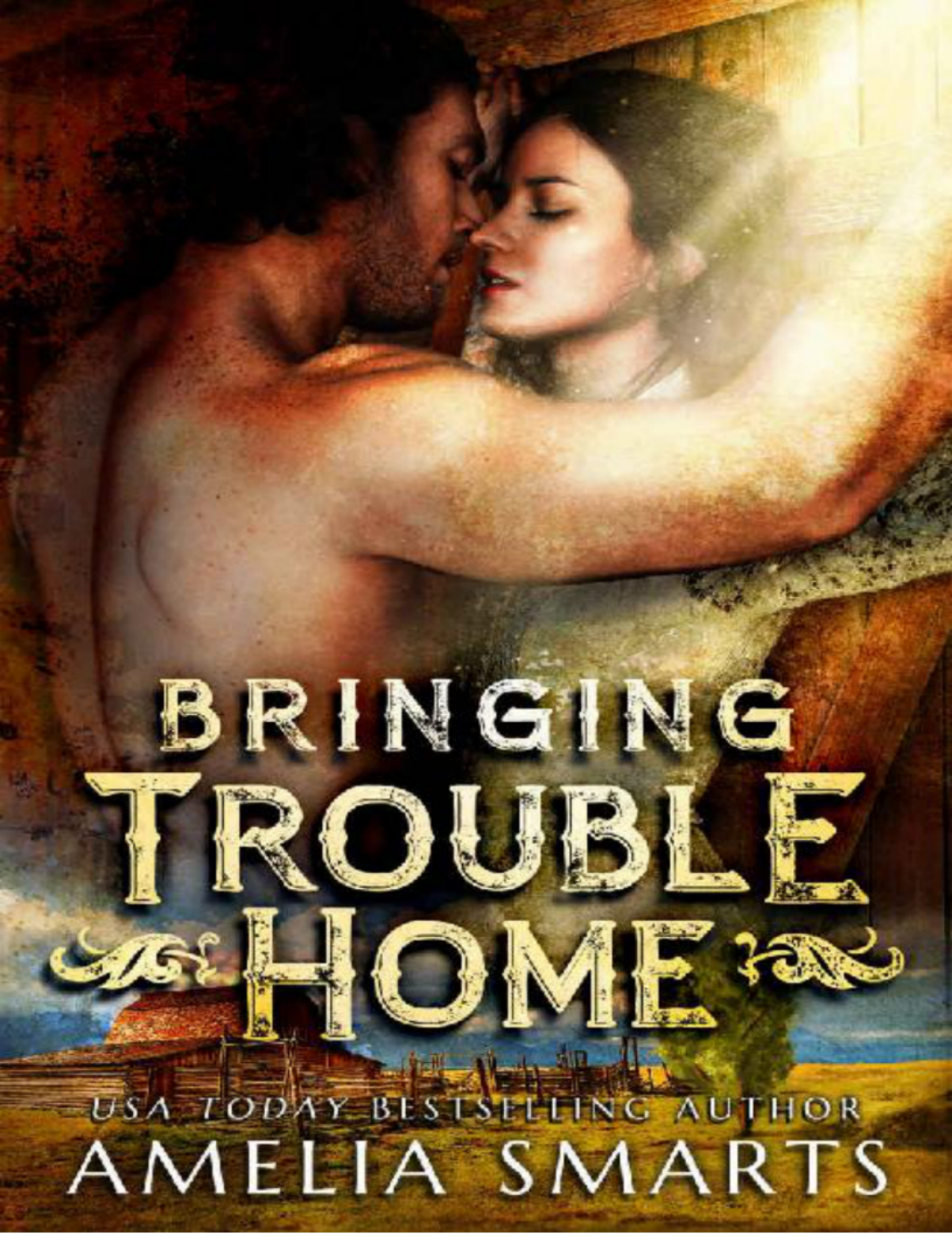

BRINGING
TROUBLE
HOME
USA TODAY BESTSELLING AUTHOR
AMELIA SMARTS

Bringing Trouble Home

Lost and Found in Thorndale, Book 1

by

Amelia Smarts

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Published by Amelia Smarts
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Bringing Trouble Home

Cover Design by Eris Adderly
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Acknowledgements

Thanks go to authors Kelly Dawson and Susannah Shannon for beta reading this book and providing invaluable insight about how to improve it. Thank you to Maggie Ryan for copy editing, and for looking up details about the old west to make the story more authentic. Finally, thank you to Eris Adderly for creating a sexy cover that made me do a major double-take—always a good sign when I'm getting ready to put my book in front of readers.

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Chapter One

Texas, 1891

Heath Wolfe sat on a stool at his family's square oak table. His two children were seated on either side of him. Steam from the stew in their bowls rose like ghosts, disappearing halfway up to the slanted log ceiling of the cabin. The scent was aromatic and comforting in its familiarity, a common supper that their housekeeper of two years had made for them often. It was the last meal she would prepare. She was moving north to live with her daughter and had said her goodbyes earlier that day.

To Heath's right sat Bitty, who barely rose to his belt buckle, but who made up for her small stature with exuberance that seemed to redouble with every one of her five years. Her given name was Elizabeth, but ever since she was born scrawny as a kitten a few ounces shy of five pounds, everyone called her Bitty instead of Betty for short.

Jack sat to Heath's left, squirming as young boys of eight do and looking down at his stew with hunger, impatient to be through with the inconvenience of prayer.

Heath folded his hands in front of him. "Jack, would you say grace?"

As his son murmured words of thanks for the food, for the green grass and fat cattle and the healthy calves, Heath prayed for the right words to tell his children. He was about to change their lives and wanted to sound resolved in his decision, though he didn't feel it. He worried he was about to make a very big mistake.

At the end of the prayer, Heath placed his napkin in his lap and cleared his throat. "I have some important news to share with you, children. As you know—" He looked at Jack. "Son, use your spoon."

Jack had already lifted the bowl to his lips. He lowered it only after taking a generous slurp. "But this way is faster, Pa," he argued.

"That doesn't matter. It's impolite." Heath tried to sound firmer than he felt. He didn't want manners to go completely by the wayside, but it was difficult for him to care too much about such niceties, being the only living parent to two children who not only needed food, shelter, and clothing provided for them, but also those provisions prepared, maintained, and sewn. Table manners were low on the list of priorities, especially in the wake of their housekeeper's departure.

Heath drained the stew from his spoon noiselessly in an attempt to model polite behavior, then dipped it in the fragrant broth again. "As I was saying, I have some important news. You both know Miss Willow McAllister, don't you? She's been known to sleep in the

town livery from time to time."

The children nodded their heads. It was as he expected. There was no one in town who *didn't* know the wild Willow McAllister. She was practically a legend as a result of her troublesome behavior. Her mother had tried to steer her straight, but raising a child alone was no easy feat, as Heath could attest, and when Willow's mother passed away three years ago, the teenaged girl had become even wilder.

Willow's latest offense was public drunkenness and vandalism. In the middle of the night, she'd gotten liquored up with one of her hooligan friends. Together, they had thrown rocks at the windows of a house owned by a woman who had insulted her, breaking all but one of them. The town marshal arrested her and let her stew in jail for twenty-four hours before setting her free on the condition that she find a job within three days and stay out of trouble. Otherwise, he would lock her up again and press serious charges. Marshal Clyde told Heath all about it—how he was worried about Willow and what would become of her if she didn't straighten up.

That was where Heath was to come in.

"Well," Heath said, after swallowing another bite of stew, "she's coming to live with us. I've arranged with the marshal to give her a job and home here."

Jack cocked his head. "Really, Pa? You want her to live here? Don't you know she's nothin' but trouble?"

"That may be so, but she needs a place to stay, and we need a lady in the house. She can do the cleaning and cooking. It will be to all our benefit."

Jack's brow furrowed in the exact same way his mother's used to. Sometimes the resemblance between them would catch Heath by surprise and send a bolt of sorrow straight through him, like lightning through a lone tree in a meadow. It happened less frequently these days, but the saddening effect always was the same.

The boy shook his head. "She ain't no lady. She chews tobacco and spits farther than any man I know. Plus, she steals. The teacher thinks it was her who stole our lunches from the mudroom of the schoolhouse a couple 'a months ago. We hafta keep our lunches next to us every morning now, and it makes the whole room smell like rotten eggs."

Heath knew about that, as well as many of Willow's other exploits the marshal had made him privy to. He'd already weighed the risk of her misbehavior against the family's need for help. He also felt obligated to do his part to help the girl. After malaria had spread throughout Thorndale at breakneck speed, many children were left orphaned, and good homes were in short supply.

At nineteen, Willow wasn't a child anymore, but she couldn't

seem to provide for herself without stealing, and Heath made a good living doing ranching work. He knew it would be to Willow's benefit for her to be part of a family and participate in making an honest wage.

"Well, son, I reckon she stole the lunches because she was hungry," Heath said. "Until you've had hunger gnawing away in your gut for days straight, it's best not to judge. While living here, she'll have three square meals a day, so she'll have no cause to steal."

Heath didn't share with the children the marshal's request that Heath discipline the girl if she acted up while in his care, using whatever method he thought would be most effective. The implication was that Heath give her a thorough hiding whenever she got out of line, but he had never raised a hand to his children and could not see the benefit of spanking a full-grown woman, troublesome though she might be. He rather hoped he could convince her to settle into a new life using gentler methods of persuasion.

Heath looked at Bitty, who had abandoned the stew and was sliding down her chair while gazing out the window. He didn't know if she'd listened to a word he'd said. "Bitty, sit up straight and eat your supper, please."

She made a face but obeyed, slurping a spoonful of stew into her mouth.

Using a stern tone, he said, "I expect you both to make Miss Willow feel welcome and to help her with chores. If you don't, I'll come home and give you more chores. Is that understood?"

Their eyes rounded slightly at the threat. They nodded and murmured their agreement.

"I'll be fetching her tomorrow afternoon. Jack, I want you to sleep in my room tonight, and Willow will take your room. Move everything from inside your desk and dresser to the office by tomorrow morning."

Jack dropped his spoon and stared at him in horror. "But, Pa… That's *my* room. I don't want—"

Heath held up his hand. "No bellyaching. We'll get a cot and clear out the office next week. It'll be a fine room for you. We need to make sure Willow is as comfortable as possible. Giving her a home is the right thing to do, for all of us, and we're going to do it."

Heath wished he felt as confident as he sounded.

Chapter Two

Willow McAllister scowled from the doorway of the livery at the man approaching her. Heath Wolfe walked with purpose, with his head facing forward, shoulders back, and jaw set. It was as though he had blinders on like the horses hitched to wagons, willfully ignoring anything happening around him.

He wore dusty brown boots and gray wool trousers that hugged his legs, which were muscled from calf to thigh from countless hours breaking studs. His plain white shirt was tucked in neatly and buttoned up to a hand's length from his neck, revealing a tuft of bristly chest hair. His Stetson was in his hand and the hair on his head, though cropped short, ruffled up slightly in the wind. As he neared, Willow saw the piercing intent in his dark blue eyes and the beads of sweat on his sunburned brow.

She couldn't deny that he was a handsome man. Ever since he'd become a widower, half the women in Thorndale were vying for his attention. Besides being good-looking, he was rich compared to most of the saddle stiffs around, owning one of the biggest ranches west of the Mississippi River.

It hadn't escaped Willow's notice how he affected the fairer sex. She'd often observed, with wry amusement, women's sly glances, giggles, twitching eyelashes and nervous fanning, all of which seemed to roll off Heath like rain from a slicker.

Though the women in town would be jealous that Willow was about to receive some of the eligible bachelor's attention, she herself wanted none of it. Willow and Heath were alike in only one way. They were both fixtures in Thorndale—as well-known and permanent as the tall oak tree by Riddle Creek. But Heath was viewed as the upper crust, being wealthy and upstanding, and Willow was viewed as bottom of the barrel. She barely scraped by and oftentimes used nefarious methods to do so.

It crossed her mind that she could run down the hay-covered aisle of the stable out the back to avoid speaking with Heath, but she decided instead to confront the problem head-on.

When he placed one fist on his hip in preparation for what appeared to be a lecture, she spoke before he could open his mouth. "I'm not coming with you, Mr. Wolfe," she told him, in lieu of hello. She jutted her chin out sharply. Her purpose in doing so was twofold. She wanted to appear proud and defiant, but she also had to crane her neck to look up at the face that topped six-feet-plus-four inches of him.

Heath seemed prepared for that type of greeting. He skipped the hellos too. "Your mama wouldn't want you sleeping in a stable

and stealing food to get by, and I reckon it'd break her heart you goin' to jail, wouldn't it now, Willow?"

Her temper flared. She didn't like how he'd so casually brought up her mother, the one person she'd ever loved. It was too shrewd, and it made her more resolved to be shed of him. She popped some tobacco into her mouth that she'd stolen from the pocket of a drunk man. "Play fair, Mr. Wolfe. No need to talk about my ma."

"Call me Heath, please. And I'm not playing, fair or otherwise." He rubbed the stubble along his jaw. By Willow's estimation, he was three days behind in giving his face a scrape, yet it only seemed to add to his handsome appearance. "Look," he continued, "the way I see it, you need me and I need you. You need a place to stay and someone to care for you, and I need someone to help around the house. I can pay you ten dollars a month, in addition to giving you room and board."

"Yeah, the marshal told me about the little arrangement the two of you cooked up behind my back. I told him the same thing I'll tell you. I'm not interested. I'll find another job, thank you." She tossed her head, waving the loose black hair on her shoulder to her back.

"Why aren't you interested?"

"I'm nineteen years old and I can take care of myself. I don't want to be part of a family." She shuddered. The mere thought of being stuck in a cabin with three other people caused her to feel like she was in the bottom of a dark well with no way out.

"Everyone wants to be part of a family," he argued. "Everyone wants to belong somewhere, and I think you'd do just fine with us."

"You don't know that. I'm not like other folks." She spat out some of the juice from her chew.

He looked at the saliva she'd left on the ground before perusing her person from head to toe. "Well, I reckon that much is true," he allowed, with disapproval evident in his tone.

Willow's cheeks flamed from both outrage and unexpected embarrassment. While other women in town always made sure to wear the best frocks they could afford in their rainbow of colors and matching ribbons, Willow wore comfortable trousers and a man's work shirt. Her feminine assets—flaring hips and generous breasts—were a source of consternation for her, not something she was eager to show off. Since she often stole food and goods to get by, being unnoticed was of primary importance.

"But you most certainly *can't* take care of yourself," Heath continued, his voice rising in volume. "Not if you have to steal to get by. And public drunkenness and vandalism points to a desperate need for supervision, before you get into any worse trouble."

"That was one time! It's not fair that I should be forced into being your servant for one mistake."

"Balderdash," he scoffed. "We both know you've been kicking up rows since you were knee-high. Besides, you wouldn't be a servant if you came to stay with me. I would expect you to contribute to the household like I do and like I expect my children to do. That's called being a family, not being a servant."

"Oh right, a *family*. So what would that make you, my fake daddy?"

"Yeah, more or less," he said, shrugging one broad shoulder. "I'd make sure you were well cared for, like any good daddy would. I would also make sure you behaved yourself, and…" He seemed to hesitate, "and I would discipline you if you didn't. That's what the marshal has requested of me."

His response was not what she'd expected. She narrowed her eyes and stared into his. "Discipline?" She found it hard to say the word. A shiver of anticipation cascaded over her spine.

"That's right. It'll be my job to help straighten you out, but I promise to be fair. I'm not a cruel man."

She studied him a long time. She could find no deception in his eyes to indicate an ulterior motive to what he'd proposed, but she was still wary. It didn't make sense that he would want to take her home, when—as he'd pointed out—she'd been causing trouble for years.

"Why me, Mr. Wolfe? Surely you know there's more women willing to cook and mind your young'uns than lazy minutes in a Sunday afternoon. Why would you bring trouble to your home?"

"Now that's the first sensible thing you've said yet. It's a good question. How about we sit down and I'll explain?" He held his hand open in the direction of the small bench against the livery wall. After she sat, he seated himself next to her, so close that his muscled thigh brushed against her markedly smaller one.

The closeness between them made her feel strangely shy. She stared at her hands, suddenly noticing the dirt under her nails and calluses on the tips of her fingers. Heath's hands were clean, similarly callused, and darker than hers. The open-range tan ran deep and permanent in his skin. A raised white scar lined the back of his left hand and added to its tough appearance. His paws looked like they could squeeze water from a brick.

He balanced his Stetson on one knee. "I suppose there are a couple reasons why I want it to be you who comes to stay at the house. I'll tell you the noble reason first."

She was intrigued, though she didn't show it. She continued to stare at her hands like they were the most interesting thing within her view, as opposed to the handsome man taking up so much space

beside her.

"Your ma was a good friend to my wife, and if my wife were alive, she would have taken you under her wing. I know it. I should have done something to help long ago, but I suppose I was busy feeling sorry for myself after losing Rose."

Willow stayed quiet. Her annoyance that Heath had once again brought her mother into the conversation was quelled by him bringing up his own grief.

Willow's mother, Martha McAllister, had been kind, generous, and well-liked by most everyone in town. Though she had never been rich, she was so proud that most people didn't know how destitute she and Willow had been.

"She was quite a woman, your ma," Heath continued. "And I can't help but think you are too, even if you choose not to act like it."

Willow scoffed. "I see. So you want to take care of me because you liked my mother, and you think I'm good like her, way deep down under my coal-black heart?"

He ignored her sarcasm. "I feel like it's the right thing to do. You're a good kid. You just… Well, you didn't have the most normal upbringing, did you?"

She didn't respond to his understatement. Growing up, she had lived with her mother in the cramped quarters above the saloon, a place Martha hated, but the only place she could afford. Willow had spent her childhood carefully tucked away from the happenings in the saloon by a mother who insisted she do hardly anything in her own home but sleep and eat. As Willow grew into a strong, active child, her mother had encouraged her to play outside far away from the bar with little supervision. Still, the saloon always felt like home, and over the years she developed a taste for spirits.

Willow never knew her father, and her mother hadn't said much about him. All Willow knew was that he'd never married her mother. As Willow began her transition from girlhood to womanhood, her mother has been adamant that Willow pay no attention to boys and end up with child as she had. It wasn't a hard feat. Her mother had been beautiful, and Willow looked nothing like her. Boys didn't give Willow any amorous consideration anyway.

She didn't get in the family way, but she'd gotten into plenty of other kinds of trouble. She never took school seriously, and she never mastered how to cook and take care of a household like her female peers. Instead she learned how to ride, fish, and hunt. When her mother died, she learned how to steal, simply because she couldn't survive any other way.

Willow often wondered if her ma would have been secretly proud of how Willow had handled herself. Instead of going down the

most likely path and working in the saloon like the other destitute and unmarried women her age, she'd become a scrapper. She'd never opened her legs for any man, let alone a customer, and she always managed to get by.

"What's the other reason for wanting me to come live with you, Heath, the reason that's not noble?" she asked. His name tasted foreign on her lips, like the first time she'd sipped gin. She'd always thought of him as Mr. Wolfe, the rich rancher, voice of authority and reason. Calling him Heath felt too familiar, but he had called her Willow, and she wanted to assert that she was not beneath him.

He tapped the dirt with the heel of his boot a few times. "Don't rightly know how to explain it without sounding like a braggart, but here goes. You mentioned that many women would be willing to come stay at the house and work for me. That's the truth. Problem is, if I hire any skirt of marrying age, she might get it into her head that's where we'd be headed. To the chapel, I mean. And frankly I'm not interested in marrying again. That's the long and short of it."

"I'm of marrying age," Willow pointed out. "But I suppose it would be completely outlandish to think a girl like me might want to get hitched."

Heath's ears slowly turned bright red, and he looked stricken. "That's not what I meant. You're so much younger than I am and—"

Willow burst into laughter, saving him from having to explain himself further. She knew what he meant. There was nothing about her appearance or attitude that made her seem to want a man. She lacked the coquettish nature and fashion sense. To her all that was a waste of time, and she had no desire to trap a man. She'd rather trap beavers and sell the fur.

Heath shook his head, but there was relief and a twinkle in his eyes. "You're going to be a handful, aren't you?"

"I haven't agreed yet. What exactly would you require me to do?"

"Nothing difficult. Just cooking, milking the cow, cleaning, minding the children, mending clothes and curtains, that sort of thing."

"Oh, is that all?" she huffed. It never failed to amaze and infuriate her how men thought women's work was easy. She'd tried both men's and women's work in her life, and those tasks which often were thought of as male duties, like tending to horses and hunting, were vastly more interesting and less arduous than the day-to-day female burden of housework. She'd like to see Heath, or any man for that matter, spend years on end maintaining a household instead of cutting cattle.

"Now don't get your dander up," he said. "All I meant is

working at the house wouldn't be anything out of the ordinary. It would be what most every woman in Texas does."

"The thing is, I'm not all that motherly. I can chase out dust bunnies, but the idea of running after children all day makes me want to pull out my hair."

His eyes narrowed, and he hesitated a beat before saying, "I'm not looking for you to be a mother to my children. They lost theirs and they've had to adjust to that. No one can take her place. As for running after them, they're well-behaved and shouldn't require much in that way."

There was no missing the ice in his tone. He'd put her in her place with a clear message. She would never attain a whit of his late wife's worth to the family. It made her feel even worse about the prospect of going home with him. At least around town, she commanded some respect from the other wanderers and troublemakers. If she went home with Heath, she'd be nothing but inferior hired help.

"How about we give it one month?" he asked, with a less-chilly voice. He stood to his feet. "That's what the marshal suggested. If you hate it, you can always leave, but I think you should at least try. It's better than Clyde locking you in jail."

Willow stood too. "Fine. One month," she said sullenly, staring at the third button down on his shirt, which was eye-level to her.

"Don't sound so sulky," he admonished, holding out his hand to shake on their deal. "You're going to live on a ranch, not in the calaboose. It won't be all that bad."

Willow allowed her hand to be swallowed inside the rancher's paw. She suddenly felt small and fragile, something she'd rarely felt before. It wasn't an entirely unpleasant feeling, but it was new to her, and she realized soon everything would be new. Dread welled up and lodged itself deep inside of her. What was she getting herself into?

Chapter Three

Willow fetched her belongings, contained in one burlap sack she kept hidden behind a panel of the livery wall. Though unhappy with the arrangement, she was aware of her good fortune. The marshal could have charged her with a crime and she could be facing a jail term and stiff fine. Instead, he'd told her that as long as she found herself a respectable job and kept her nose clean, he would give her a pass on the vandalism.

As she toted her belongings to the front entrance of the livery, she heard the voice of the very man on her mind: Marshal Clyde Shaw. She groaned. She did not want to see the lawman. He'd given her a tongue-lashing that had generated one embarrassing tear from her, and she had no wish to endure another round. She hung back and waited, hoping he would leave before her absence was noticed.

Luck was not on her side. Heath called out, "You gonna take all day, girl? Pony up. I've got to get back to the ranch."

With a grunt of frustration, she trudged outside, keeping her eyes downcast. "I'm ready," she said to the dirt, and spat out her tobacco.

"She's not over the moon about the arrangement," Heath explained to Clyde, "but she's agreed to give it a go for one month."

"That's something. If anyone can help the girl in a month, you can," Clyde responded.

Heath placed his Stetson on his head. "Well, I think we can help each other."

Clyde nodded. "You let me know how it goes. If there's any trouble you don't want to handle, I'll see to it—"

"Oh, ho! Here I am," Willow interrupted, patting herself along her arm. "I thought maybe I'd disappeared and that's why you two were talking as though I weren't here."

Heath's lips twitched with amusement, and Willow silently thanked the heavens he wasn't completely humorless, as she'd assumed someone like him to be.

But Clyde's eyes narrowed. "Don't get smart, Willow McAllister. I still have a pair of iron bracelets with your name on them."

With great effort, Willow kept the rebellion she felt from appearing on her face, and she held back a remark about his lousy taste in jewelry.

After Heath and Clyde exchanged goodbyes, Heath said, "Come along, Trouble." He took Willow lightly by the elbow and directed her to his horse and buggy. His touch felt strange to her, and she realized a man had never gently steered her anywhere. She wanted to feel annoyed at his casual dominance, but she felt strangely accepting of it.

Soon they were on their way to Heath's ranch, her new home. She sat still and upright while he chirked to the horse. Her burlap sack was wedged between them, but she still felt his nearness. Everything about the man, from his substantial height to his deep voice to his vaguely proprietary touch, projected a sort of easy authority she was not accustomed to. Her male acquaintances seemed to take up less space in the world. They were the kind of men she understood. Like her, they had shifty eyes and slightly stooped shoulders. They did not stand tall and gaze at the world with resolve. They ducked and dodged their tribulations as well as they could. Heath seemed like he would grasp tribulation around the throat and throw it to the ground.

Willow shifted on the hard seat and grumbled, "I don't know why the marshal didn't just fine me and put me in jail instead of making this arrangement with you. It's not because he has any fond feelings toward me. Maybe he's like you and feels some kind of loyalty to my mother."

Heath didn't answer her, which caused Willow to continue talking, mostly to herself, trying to figure out the marshal's motivation for setting her up with a job that many women would kill for. "Maybe he doesn't want to do the paperwork or deal with locking up a woman," she mused.

"For Pete's sake," Heath said finally. "Hasn't it occurred to you that the marshal is a good man who decided to show you a little mercy?"

"Ha! He sure didn't show much of that when he arrested me," she retorted. "He grabbed my arms behind me. When I tried to wrench free while he was tightening the cuffs, he kicked my feet from under me so I fell flat on ground. Got a mouthful of good ol' Thorndale dirt."

"You'd broken the law, and he's a lawman. I'm sure he didn't enjoy roughing you up. Did you stop resisting arrest after that?"

"Yeah, but he wasn't done mistreating me. He hauled me to the jailhouse, planted me in front of his desk, and hollered and threatened and scared the livin' bejesus out of me. There was no need for that. I was already meek as a lamb by that point."

"Maybe he wanted to make an impression, make sure you don't ever get caught up in such mischief again. And that brings me back to what I said before. He's a good man who decided to show you mercy. I'll tell you a secret about the marshal. He's got a soft spot a mile wide for children."

"I'm not a child."

"To him you are. He's known you since you were skipping through town and jumping into the biggest puddles you could find. What he did, it was for your own good. He knew you needed discipline and leniency at the same time."

Willow could see that Heath thought highly of Marshal Clyde Shaw, and no amount of arguing would make him see otherwise. Never in her life had she been subjected to a man disciplining her 'for her own good,' and she was suspicious of the concept. She recalled how Heath had mentioned he was prepared to straighten her out with discipline. The thought caused a sudden awareness of her body, especially her bottom clenching and bouncing on the wooden seat.

The horse plodded along for a couple miles, then pulled the buggy in front of Heath's large cabin. Before Willow could grab her sack, Heath had taken hold of it and jumped to the ground. He rounded the buggy and reached out to her, palm up.

She stared at his proffered hand a moment before she scowled. "Heath, let's not pretend I'm a lady, all right?" She hopped from the seat to the wheel to the ground, quick as a jackrabbit. She took her sack from him and waited to be led inside.

Heath glowered at her but had no opportunity to respond. The cabin door opened, and a boy appeared. As he walked toward them, Willow recognized him as Heath's son. His shirt was wrinkled, and his trousers had grass stains on the knees. He wore a curious expression on his freckled face as he gazed at her unabashedly.

"Jack, say hello to Miss McAllister," Heath said. "Willow, I believe you've met Jack before."

"Hi, Jack," she said to the boy. "You can call me Willow if you like, and if it's all right with your pa."

The three of them entered the cabin before Heath answered. "How about the children call you Miss Willow?"

"Fine by me." She looked around at the large living area. Under her feet was a mat with the word Welcome burned into the bristled fibers. A large blue rug covered a good portion of the hardwood floor. On top of the rug was an assortment of wooden furniture, including a center table and a few chairs. A large pillowed sofa faced the fireplace.

"You're gonna have my old room, Miss Willow," the boy said.

"Why don't you show her the way, Jack?" Heath suggested. To Willow, he said, "My foreman's daughter was minding the children for me while I was in town. I'll tell her to go home. You take all the time you need to unpack and settle, and then we'll have a family meeting."

"Should I come?" she quipped.

Heath frowned, but he didn't respond. He turned and walked toward the door on the far side of the sitting room. Willow realized she was likely doing herself no favors by continued to goad the man. She decided then and there to tone it down. She had no cause to be angry with Heath, and she might as well try to be polite.

As Willow followed Jack down the hallway, she looked around.

The cabin was as spacious inside as it looked outside. She knew that Heath's father had built it several decades ago, and then Heath had added on to it, making it one-of-a-kind in the town of Thorndale. It had actual bedrooms, not one large room with partitioning. Wood paneling formed the walls, which were decorated in no apparent pattern with family photographs. Several needlepoint images dotted the walls. They were scribed with uplifting messages like "Live Simply" and "Home Is Where the Heart Is". That they were stitched by a woman who was now in her grave gave the words a melancholy slant.

"Here's your new room," Jack said, opening the door to a cozy space furnished simply with a green rug, desk, bed, and dresser. Willow set her sack on the bed. It looked soft and recently made with a blue and white quilt folded neatly at the end. An unlit oil lamp with decorative etching on the hurricane glass sat atop the three-drawer dresser. Next to the lamp was a white basin and pitcher filled with clear water. On the desk was an inkwell and feather pen along with several pieces of plain brown paper. A selection of hard-backed books lined the end of the desk along the wall, propped up by two halves of a large amethyst stone. Dark blue curtains parted around the window, allowing the late-morning sun to stream through.

"Do you like the room?" Jack asked her gloomily.

Willow blinked, feeling like she was coming out of a spell. Her new room was far more comfortable than she'd imagined it would be. Never in her life had she been surrounded by such wonderful creature comforts. Instead of feeling trapped as she'd expected to be at her new home, she felt a sort of warmth and eagerness to shut the door and soak in her private space alone.

"It's a very nice room, Jack. Thank you for lending it to me for a while. I promise to give it back soon."

The grumpy look drained from his face, and he smiled up at her. "I moved my jacks and marbles into Pa's room, but you can borrow them if you want."

"That's mighty nice of you. I love marbles."

His smile broadened, and Willow couldn't help but smile back. Despite the fact that she'd arrived practically kicking and screaming, she had to admit that her first impression of life at the Wolfe Ranch was a good one. Her room was more than satisfactory, and Jack seemed like a nice kid. Maybe it wouldn't be so bad working for Heath. And even if the work was dreadful, at least at the end of the day she could retire to her own space.

When Jack left, she closed the door and unpacked her belongings from the sack—a pair of trousers, two linen shirts, two drawers, a spare shift, stockings, a nightgown, and a knife. All the

items fit into half of one of the dresser drawers. The other two drawers were empty. She checked inside the desk and found it to be empty as well. She guessed that Heath had made Jack clear out the room for her. It was a nice gesture. The room truly felt like her own.

After a mild struggle, she pried open the window and gazed out. A slight breeze cooled her face. The view was of gently rolling green hills, dotted with wildflowers. She closed her eyes and breathed in a faint aroma of honeysuckle along with oat hay and horses. She knew a stable was around the other side of the house outside her view from the window.

She didn't want to leave the room and wondered how long she could get away with staying put. Heath had said she could take all the time she wanted to unpack and settle, but she guessed that was something people in polite society said without really meaning it and that he expected her to emerge from her room, lickety-split.

She heard voices coming from the living area, and her heart dropped. It was as she expected. Heath had already assembled his children there. After indulging in a quick bounce on the bed, which was indeed as soft as she'd guessed, she forced herself to join the Wolfe family.

Heath sat in an armchair next to the unlit fireplace, while his children sat on the sofa. Heath stood when she walked in and waved at a chair. "Willow, please sit."

She obeyed, lowering herself into the armchair that matched Heath's. Though they sat together in a circle, Willow couldn't help but feel like she was in front of the room on display. All eyes fell on her, and she squirmed. She hated being the focus of attention.

Heath introduced Willow to Bitty, though they'd met before in town. Heath then lectured his children about making Willow feel welcome and behaving themselves while he was away working. "I also expect you to help her with the household chores," Heath said as he drew his short speech to a close.

Bitty spoke up then, directing her statement to Willow. "I'm in charge of fetching the eggs from the coop because I'm the best at doing that."

Willow raised her eyebrows with mock skepticism. "Are you? What makes you the best?"

"It's because I know how to scoop out the eggs before getting pecked by the grumpy hens. I sometimes sing a little ditty to them and they like that too."

Willow acted surprised at the child's cleverness. "What a good idea. I'm mighty grateful you'll be doin' that, Bitty. I don't want to get pecked."

Bitty's face broke into a grin. "Yeah, and I know how to steer

clear of the mean rooster too. But Pa says we'll eat him soon anyway."

"Well, until we do, I thank you kindly for saving me from him."

"You're welcome," Bitty said magnanimously.

Heath cast an appreciative smile at Willow. "I think this is going to work out just fine," he said, sounding like he meant it.

Willow almost believed him.

Chapter Four

Heath spent the following day mending the fence along the eastern border of his property. His ranch hands were on the other side of the range, driving the cows west to freshly grown grazing land, so he was alone with his thoughts the entire day. Willow McAllister kept coming to his mind.

When they had sat around the sitting room for the family meeting, he'd noticed for the first time how exceptionally beautiful she was. He reckoned he hadn't noticed it before because she seemed to do everything in her power to hide it. Her dark hair, pulled tightly away from her face in a single braid, was thick and shining. She had the sort of proud, handsome features he'd seen in the Apache—high cheekbones and expressive, dark eyes. Her lips were full and, despite the lack of paint, appeared as red as an overripe strawberry.

However, draped around her compact, voluptuous figure were drab clothes that belonged on a working cowboy, not a beautiful young woman. How she held herself was sloppy as well. She would do well to learn how to sit like a lady, with shoulders back and a poised expression, as opposed to hunched over casting furtive glances like an anxious filly.

He had the urge to insist she conduct herself like the young woman she was, but he knew without testing it that his efforts would be met with hostility. Willow was not used to taking orders, least of all from a man, and she'd likely try to scratch out his eyes if he suggested even a single modification in her dress or manners.

Besides, it was outside the scope of his responsibility. He had agreed with the marshal to teach her to behave in the sense of not stealing, doing an honest day's work, and staying out of trouble with the law. Dressing like a man and acting coarsely weren't sins in and of themselves, so he knew he had no right to impose a change in that regard.

At the end of his workday, as the sun dipped into the horizon, Heath rode his horse back from the range at a relaxed jog, all the while wondering how Willow had fared on her first day. Before he'd left, she'd asked him what she should do. He'd suggested cleaning and cooking supper. "Get Jack and Bitty to help you. They know their way around," he'd said.

Heath slowed his horse to a walk and loosened the reins. The path had turned rocky and was at a slight decline, so he wanted his horse to pick her own pace.

He thought about the previous day. If Willow hadn't made such a good impression on him during the family meeting, he likely would have popped in and checked on her and the children at least once

instead of working so far away from the house all day. Willow's interaction with his children had set his mind at ease. Jack had told him how nicely she'd thanked him for giving up his room, and when Bitty proudly proclaimed that she was the best at gathering eggs from the chickens, Willow had responded with validation and enthusiasm.

No matter Willow's flaws, she'd revealed to him aspects of her personality that all of her rebellion and penchant for mischief couldn't mask—compassion and human kindness, along with an ability to relate to someone different from herself. He'd known women with fine manners purchased at the best finishing schools who didn't have that ability. It was something that couldn't be bought and he didn't know exactly where it came from, but it was something he didn't take for granted when he encountered it.

A familiar bolt of sorrow hit Heath then, as the memory of his beautiful Rose glided into his mind as easy as cream over a biscuit. His late wife had been blessed with that quality of relating to all kinds of people.

He hadn't realized his luck when he'd first married Rose. She was predictably sweet and innocent as one would expect of a debutante from high society. But he noticed in the months following their wedding that, along with her genteel nature, was a streak of irreverence so carefully hidden, he was one of the few to be privileged to witness it. Her jokes were littered with coarse language, and she deftly clipped the horns of anyone who disrespected her. At the same time, she did not consider herself better than anyone, and in fact went out of her way to befriend those less fortunate, such as Willow's mother. Rose had been able to appreciate people as they were, not how they appeared.

Heath arrived home, feeling depressed and nostalgic for the days when he would come home to his beautiful, surprising wife. It was unfair that she had been taken from the world before she could bless it to her full potential. And it saddened him daily that his children would not reap the benefits of growing up to learn from both her good manners and her good mind. He unsaddled and brushed his mare slowly, then walked into the cabin, bone-tired and hungry.

Upon broaching the entrance, he came to a sudden stop and looked around. Smoke from the kitchen clouded the sitting room and caused his eyes to water. Bitty was running from one end of the room to the other wearing nothing but her underclothes, shouting that the prairie was on fire. Jack was standing atop the sofa pointing a stick at the fireplace and imitating the sounds of a rifle. For some reason he could not fathom, the curtains from the two windows in the sitting room had been pulled down, wadded up, and stacked in the corner. Willow was nowhere to be seen, though he guessed she was in the

kitchen attending to whatever was smoking.

"Jack! Bitty!" he called out sharply, alerting them to his presence.

Both children halted and peered at him with matching guilty expressions. He'd never before seen them running in the house or standing on the furniture.

He tossed his Stetson on the chair next to the door and stomped his boots before he realized he wasn't standing on the mat. It wasn't in its proper place, so he'd just shaken the dirt from his boots directly onto the floor. It did nothing to help his mood.

"Come here," he barked at his children, who obeyed about as quickly as sap slides down a tree in February. When they finally stood in front of him with gazes focused on the dirty floor, he said, "Why are you behaving like wild mustangs instead of helping Miss Willow like I asked you to?"

"She said she didn't need our help," Jack responded. "She said we should play."

"Fine. But since when have you been allowed to play like this, running around the house and jumping on the furniture?"

No response.

"Well?" he prompted.

"Never?" Jack guessed.

"Precisely. Now get to your rooms and calm down. And for goodness sake, put some clothes on, Bitty."

"Alright, Pa," she answered cheerfully, and proceeded to run to her room.

"Walk, Bitty!" Heath said, while Jack walked away with measured steps.

He shook his head and went in search of the next person in need of a scolding, and found her as he suspected in the kitchen. She sat slumped on a stool, her well-formed limbs hanging loosely around her. Strands of wavy dark hair had come free from her braid, and a sheen of perspiration wet her flushed cheeks.

One look at her face caused his annoyance to fade, replaced with alarm. She looked utterly defeated, and his first instinct was to wrap his arms around her. Instead, he said, "Willow? You alright?"

She looked at him with red-rimmed, watery eyes, from crying or from the smoke in the air, he wasn't sure, and said, "I'm sorry, Mr. Wolfe, I burned supper and didn't get hardly any cleaning done. I noticed the curtains needed hemming, so I started that and soon realized it would take days. So I stopped trying to sew and got to work cleaning the floors, but I only got so far as shaking out the mats because it was nearing suppertime and I hadn't even started anything. I put the chicken over high heat and it didn't cook. It went straight

from raw to burnt. I'm sorry, I'm just awful at this. I tried. I promise I really did try. I'll leave tomorrow and find a different job."

Heath leaned a shoulder against the frame of the door, studied her, and thought about what was best to say. It wouldn't do any good to tell her she had done just fine on her first day, when she was smart enough to know she hadn't. He also knew she would think him patronizing if he tried to encourage her. She'd made it clear she was too proud to accept even a small gesture of help or kindness from him, such as when he'd tried to help her down from the buggy.

So Heath took the only approach he thought would make sense to her. Gruffly, he said, "You promised me a month, young lady, and that's how long I expect you to try and work here."

She stared at him blandly and chewed on something large that made one of her cheeks puff out like a chipmunk's. "Wouldn't you want that I should I go?"

"No, I want that you should to learn to cook and make yourself useful."

Chew. "What makes you think I ever can?" *Chew*. "I've loused up everything to shit on my very first day." *Chew*.

Tobacco. A nasty habit for a man, in his opinion, and even more disgusting for a woman. He strode over, took a rag from the table, and held it in front of her. "Spit it out."

She scowled. "That would be a waste of good tobaccer."

"Consider it your punishment for giving up so easy. Come on now."

Her scowl deepened, but she obediently spit it out. Heath wadded up the rag and tossed it aside. She avoided his eyes.

He had guessed it would be difficult for her to take on housework, but he hadn't guessed how completely out of her element she'd be. It didn't seem prudent to allow her even one more day on her own trying what she didn't know how to do.

After a short time ruminating, an idea came to him. He knew the marshal's daughter, Sadie, had taken over the household duties ever since her ma had died, and he wondered if she would mind coming out to the ranch to teach Willow the basics. "Know what?" he said, "I'm going to see about having someone come teach you how to cook."

"Who?" Willow asked, in the same defeated tone.

When Heath told her his idea, she sighed. "You know how old Sadie is? She's twelve. Nearly half my age. It's embarrassing, needing help from someone that young."

Heath rubbed the stubble along the side of his jaw, noting to himself that he needed to shave when he got a free minute. "I think you'd best set aside your pride about getting some help. It's clear you

need it. And hey, I'm sure you can teach Sadie a thing or two she doesn't know."

A naughty glint came into her eyes. "I can teach her how to pick pockets. I'm sure the marshal would *love* that."

Heath was glad to see some of her spirit coming back—he didn't at all like to see her looking so defeated—but he felt obliged to set her straight. "You do anything tricky like try to corrupt the marshal's daughter, I'll be forced to punish you."

She sighed. "Cooking is punishment enough. It's intolerable and boring."

Amused by her frankness, he let out a short chuckle. "Work tends to be that way a lot of the time, I'm afraid."

"I can't believe you still want me to stay here after I ruined everything," she said spreading her hands palms up in a sign of confusion.

"I don't give up easy, and neither should you. Now, how 'bout we scramble some eggs and butter up some of the leftover bread? I don't have a hankerin' to keep jawing with you when my stomach's rumbling, and I'd wager those two rascals of mine are hungry too."

She nodded her agreement and walked to the cellar to fetch the goods. "Bitty got the eggs today, just like she said she would, and Jack chopped more wood for the stove. You have fine children, Heath. I like them a lot."

It pleased him more than he thought it would that she liked his children. "Thank you, Willow, but they weren't acting so fine when I walked in. Bitty was hollering and running about, and Jack was standing on the sofa."

Willow shrugged. "So? They were just playing. No harm in that, is there? What's the worst that could happen with them running inside?"

Her question gave him pause. Before he could answer, she said, "See?" with a look of victory. "You people in polite society make up rules and restrictions for no good reason. Fold your hands. Cross your ankles. Eat with a spoon. Sit up straight. Don't run in the house. Blah blah blah." She waved her hand dismissively before turning her back to him to slice the bread.

Heath didn't bother arguing, mostly because he couldn't think of a single rebuttal. Instead, he smiled. The girl was a handful, no doubt about that, but so far he liked her—quite a lot more than he thought he would. It had been a long time since a woman had amused and surprised him. And looking at her pert little backside made him want to give her a sound swat for mouthing off to him. Instead, with effort, he turned and walked out the door to fetch the children.

Chapter Five

Willow woke from a restful slumber in her new bed. She hadn't slept so well in a long time, and she thanked her lucky stars that Heath still wanted to give her a chance. She'd expected him at the very least to be angry with her for leaving the house a mess and ruining supper, but he hadn't even acted annoyed. Instead, he'd been hell-bent on helping her. His kindness had surprised her, as had his humor when she'd spoken frankly. It made her want to do the very best she could at her new job, and she hoped Sadie Shaw could teach her something worth learning.

While the four of them ate breakfast, Heath told Willow and the children that, but for a quick trip to town to inquire about whether Sadie could help Willow learn to cook, he would stay home that day and allow his hands to work without him on the range.

Willow silently observed Heath with his children throughout the day. He read to them from thick books with big words, helped Jack whittle a wooden bull, and twisted the rope around with Jack so that Bitty could jump-rope—outside, of course.

Despite her desire to continue working on the ranch, a growing sense of melancholy came over her. She felt bereft. She didn't care that she wasn't included in the Wolfe family's activities. But she began to realize in watching them that she had been deprived of something throughout her life.

Willow kept herself busy cleaning. She swept the hardwood floors and was pleased with how much dirt she managed to pick up. She found a fresh rag and got to work scrubbing the surfaces in the kitchen with a bit of lemon and vinegar. She cleaned the windows, too, and put the curtains back up, deciding it was best to save the mending until she'd gotten into a better routine with the day-to-day chores.

When Heath returned from town, he made a jovial announcement. "Good news, Trouble."

Willow hid a smile. The nickname he'd bestowed on her was said with an affectionate tone, and it didn't bother her at all. Rather, it gave her a sort of happy feeling.

"Sadie Shaw has agreed to give you cooking lessons," Heath said. "She'll call on you tomorrow."

"Alright, that's fine. Thank you," Willow responded. She knew she should be glad that someone was coming to help her, but it made her feel inept. "I cleaned a lot today," she reported, in an effort to regain some of her pride by sounding useful. She proceeded to give a run-through of all her chores, while Heath listened with a patient expression on his face.

"Good job, Trouble," he said, when she was finished listing her activities. He strode to his armchair next to the fire and settled into it with a newspaper in his hand.

The small praise and term of endearment caused pleasure to wash over her. It unnerved her. Since when had anyone's opinion of her become important? Her thoughts were interrupted by the sound of the front door bursting open and the children tumbling in.

Jack was laughing, but Bitty had a pout on her face. She stood by the door and crossed her arms. "Pa, Jack says he's allowed to pet Ace but I'm not. That's not true, is it?"

Heath glanced up from his paper. "It's true, Bitty."

"See! I told you," Jack said. He laughed again.

Willow had learned the previous day that Ace was a stallion—tame in comparison to many stallions—but a stallion nonetheless, and Heath's reasoning for not allowing Bitty near him were related to safety. Heath was already teaching Jack how to work with horses, but Bitty had yet to even ride without assistance.

Heath frowned at Jack. "It disappoints me, son, that you would laugh at your sister's hurt feelings. It's unkind."

The boy sobered. "Sorry," he mumbled. "She was goin' on and on about how you *would* let her pet Ace, and I knew you wouldn't. I like being right is all."

Willow could see Heath wasn't impressed, evidenced by the scowl lines across his forehead. "How about you go enjoy being right in your room." It wasn't a question.

As Jack trudged down the hall, Bitty continued to pout. "Pa, can I go see Ace tomorrow and feed him some carrots? I won't pet him."

This time Heath didn't look up from his paper. "No."

"But, Pa, why will you let Jack around Ace and not me?" Her words were spoken in a whine, with increasing volume.

"Jack is older, that's why."

Bitty's eyes flooded with tears. "That's not fair!" she exclaimed, and stomped. Her tiny foot was surprisingly loud against the hardwood floor and echoed around the room.

Willow looked down the hallway longingly. She wondered if she could slip out unnoticed. She didn't want to stick around to watch Bitty descend into a full-blown tantrum, which was where she appeared to be heading.

"I'm sorry you feel it's unfair, Bitty, but you've heard my answer."

Bitty's hands closed into fists. Her face flushed red. "I-I hate you, Pa."

Heath closed his paper, folded it twice, and slapped it on the

table next to his chair. His face had become hard. “You think that’s a nice thing to say to me, Elizabeth Wolfe?”

Bitty’s lower lip quivered. “No, but you hurt my feelings as bad as Jack did.”

“That’s no excuse for what you said. Come here.”

Willow winced. She really wanted to escape, guessing that Heath was going to punish Bitty, but she wished he wouldn’t. If Bitty felt like she hated him in that moment, why shouldn’t she say so? It didn’t seem a statement worthy of punishment, but Willow highly doubted Heath saw things the same way.

Bitty’s shoulders stooped and she walked over with her head bent to stand in front of him. She stared at her wringing hands in front of her.

Heath’s voice was gentle. “How did I hurt your feelings?”

Bitty began to cry in earnest. “B-because you l-let Jack pet Ace and it’s not fair that y-you don’t let me.” She sniffled and ran the back of her hand under her nose. “You don’t love me as m-much as you love Jack.”

“That’s not true, and you know it. Jack is older and knows how to handle a big horse like Ace because I’ve shown him how. When you get older, I’ll show you how. You’re young and small and I want you safe with no broken bones or bruises. Alright?”

The crestfallen look on her face seemed to lessen, and she nodded. “Alright, Pa,” she said, hiccupping.

“That’s what fathers do, they make sure their children are safe, even if that means having one unhappy for a bit. I’m not trying to ruin your good time because I like doing that.”

Bitty was looking down at a button on Heath’s shirt until he placed a knuckle under her chin and raised her face so she could look him in the eyes. “Fathers also make sure their children behave properly. Do you think you behaved properly by stomping your foot and saying you hate me?”

She blinked and tears streamed down her cheeks. “No,” she whimpered. “I’m sorry.”

He nodded. “Thank you for apologizing, sweetheart. Be more careful about what you say from now on. Why don’t you go help Miss Willow set the table? I know you’re very good at that.”

Bitty nodded and skipped happily toward Willow, who put her to work placing forks on the table. All the while, Willow stole glances at Heath, who had resumed reading his newspaper. For the first time in her life, she felt respect and admiration for a man. He wasn’t like the other men she knew—full of bravado and bluster, with big booming voices and puffed-up chests, swaggering around and demanding respect. And yet somehow, Heath seemed infinitely

stronger and more impressive than all the other men she knew. The irony struck her then. It was by caring so little about garnering respect that he had managed to earn hers.

Chapter Six

The next morning, while Heath was at the range, Willow thought about Heath's interactions with his children and felt a sadness and longing so strong it took her breath away. Throughout her life, Willow's interactions with men had been mostly antagonistic, since she was always determined to prove herself a worthy adversary despite her lesser physical strength.

Having witnessed the exchange between Heath and Bitty, who could not be more different when it came to strength, Willow knew she'd seen fatherly love in its purest form, something she'd never experienced herself.

She heated some water over the stove to use for washing clothes, simultaneously brewing with melancholy. As the water began to boil, she heard a female voice shout, "Hullo, the house!" Willow removed the kettle from the fire and wiped her hands on her trousers before opening the front door.

The marshal's daughter Sadie Shaw was tethering her horse to the post. The horse immediately lowered her head to drink from the trough of water next to it.

"Howdy, Sadie," Willow said. "You need any help getting your horse put up?"

"Nah, I'll just unsaddle her and pick her hooves, and then I'll be right in."

A short time later, Sadie came inside and looked around. "Nice cabin you got here."

"It's not mine," Willow said. "I'm just the hired help." She spoke the words bitterly, with renewed sadness and a pinch of anger that fate hadn't granted her a home or family.

Sadie said, "I'm the marshal's daughter, and I feel like hired help too. I've had to do a lot of work since my ma died. I reckon that's why Mr. Wolfe thought I'd be able to help you. I'm in charge of all the cooking at my place, so I know what I'm doin'."

Willow observed the twelve-year-old girl, doubtful over whether the child could teach her anything. She was mousy in appearance, with stringy brown hair pulled into a bun at her nape, more a schoolmarm's style than a child's. Her eyes were large and mournful, and her clothes brown and drab. She looked like the unhappiest child Willow had ever laid eyes on.

"I'm sorry about your ma. Mine died as well," Willow said. "Hard going through life without your ma."

Sadie shrugged her thin shoulders. "I guess we all got a sad story since the malaria outbreak. I don't mean to complain."

"I didn't take it that way," Willow assured her. "Let's go to the

kitchen, why don't we?"

Sadie nodded. When they were in the kitchen, the girl spent a long time *ooh*ing and *ahh*ing over the modern Dutch oven and the water pump that sucked in water from a well out front. "I just can't believe it. Water right in the kitchen," she murmured in awe, and then unnecessarily pumped the water out a third time. She seemed to be making an effort to convince herself it was real. "You sure are lucky, having all these newfangled things. Why, I have to lug water from the well fifty yards away fifty times a day."

"Can't your pa help you?" Willow asked, with little attempt to hide her derision. The marshal was high on her list of least-favorite people, and hearing how hard his daughter worked to gather water did nothing to raise him in her esteem.

"Sometimes he does. But he's gone a lot. For a spell it was just me and Ada at home, but now we got Grace, Miles, and Luke. Ada's too young to do much of anything, but I suppose I should try to get the other children to help."

"Who are they? I thought the marshal just had you and Ada."

"They're orphans. Their parents died from the malaria, and my pa decided they needed a family instead of being put in an orphan's home. He explained that we've got the room and it's the Christian thing to do. Funny how the Christian thing always seems to mean more work for me." She stopped and shook her head. "Lordy, there I go complaining again."

"Seems like you got cause to," Willow said.

Sadie studied her a moment. "Can I ask you a question?" she asked, frowning. "I hope you aren't offended, but… why do you dress like a man?"

Willow thought over how to explain it. She'd tried to explain it to women and girls before, but they'd never been satisfied with her answer. "I like men's clothes because they are more comfortable. Why should I dress nice when I'm working? I'm not trying to attract a man, I'm trying to make a living, or in the instance of today, trying to learn how to cook. I also don't like to call attention to myself with pretty dresses."

Sadie's frown deepened before it turned into a small smile. "Pardon me for saying it, but I don't think that's working, you trying not to call attention to yourself. You're a beautiful woman in men's britches. I'd say you are attracting attention as good as sounding a bugle."

Willow hadn't thought of it that way before. And, in spite of herself, she flushed with pleasure over the compliment. Sadie was the first person to ever say she was beautiful, and she wondered if others thought the same. She found herself wondering whether Heath liked

how she looked, but she quickly pushed the thought out of her mind.

Sadie inquired about the goods in the cellar. They retrieved flour and sugar, picked carrots and potatoes from the garden, and removed utensils, pots, and pans from various drawers and cupboards. Jack and Bitty came in and out of the house throughout the cooking lesson, entertaining themselves and behaving well, just like Heath had promised they would.

"I'll show you how to mix and knead dough for bread," Sadie said. "Then while it's rising, I'll show you how to roast a chicken in this here fine oven. My, I'm almost happy about cooking here."

By the time Sadie finished her lesson, Willow came to the opinion that Sadie was as nice a girl as she had ever met. She was simple and honest, without the airs and devices found in so many girls. As talented as she was in the kitchen, she behaved with humility. The two of them were alike in that neither cared to call attention to herself.

After Sadie left, when the family sat down for supper that evening, Heath said, "Land's sake, this chicken is mighty good."

The children nodded their agreement while eating with vigor.

"Sadie is a gem," Willow said. "It was a good idea of yours, having her come to teach me what she knows. I like her, and she's very skillful."

"Not surprised about that. She comes from good stock," Heath said. "The marshal is one of the finest men I know."

Willow snorted. Before she could censor her thoughts, she said, "I'm not convinced of the marshal's fine qualities." She managed to keep her reasoning to herself. She thought it a shame that a girl of only twelve had to be responsible for an entire household, and Willow blamed the marshal for allowing her to assume that responsibility.

Heath drank some water, set the glass down, and gave Willow a long look. "I get the feeling it takes a lot for a man to win your approval."

She took a bite of her chicken and chewed it thoughtfully. "I reckon you're right," she admitted. "Most men are blustery, or domineering, or small-minded, or cruel."

Heath's eyebrows raised slowly. "I will admit to only the first two, and only on rare occasions."

Willow shook her head. "You're none of those, Heath, believe me."

An amused glint entered his eyes, and his lips quirked up. "And you're in a position to know that after spending three days here, Trouble?"

She blushed, feeling foolish for being presumptuous. "I get a feeling about people is all. Haven't been wrong too often when it

comes to people's characters."

He gave her a broad grin. "I see. In any case, I'm glad I've been able to hide my lousy qualities, especially from you."

"Why especially from me?"

"Because I want to impress you. You're hard to impress, and I like a challenge."

She found it difficult to believe that Heath felt compelled to impress anyone, especially her, but she played along. "Shouldn't I be trying to impress you, since I'm the one working for you?"

He laughed. "You don't seem to care about impressing anyone. You are who you are, and we can take it or leave it."

"And you know that about me after three days?" she shot back.

He shook his head. "Touché, my dear. Touché."

"Huh?"

"It's a French expression. See? I'm trying to impress you using fancy French words. Never mind."

Willow glared at him, suspicious over his assertation that he wanted to impress her. Wasn't that something a man did when he was sweet on a woman? She couldn't fathom that he would feel that way about her, but she felt dangerously close to believing him. She scowled and spent the rest of the meal in silence.

After the children excused themselves, she filled the basin with water to do the washing-up, and Heath collected the dishes from the table.

"I'll get the plates," Willow said. "You can go read your newspaper."

"I know I can. But suppose I want to stay in the kitchen and speak with you?" He placed the dirty plates on the counter next to her.

She shrugged and rubbed one of the plates clean with soap and water. "It's your house. Stay wherever you want."

He chuckled softly. "My, but you're a tough little scamp, aren't you? You ever let anyone past that wall you got up?"

"I haven't the faintest idea what you're talking about," she said crisply.

"You certainly do, Trouble." He reached down and gave her a whack across the rump that made her stand on her toes and emit a very girlish squeal of surprise.

She stared at him, shocked, her mouth hanging open, the dish in her hand dripping water into the basin.

His eyed twinkled. "You know exactly what I'm talking about. Lying is naughty, Willow. Do it again and you'll get another."

"I wasn't lying! How can you know if I have a wall up? Maybe this is just how I am."

He brought his hand back as though to spank her again, but she whirled around and faced him head-on. She glared up at him as a soft growl came from her throat.

He grinned back at her. “I suppose I know because I’ve got walls up myself. Anyway, I’m only teasing you, though I maintain you told me a fib that deserved a whack. I’ll let you finish the dishes in peace.” He walked out the door, leaving Willow to stare after him, still shocked.

When she resumed washing the dishes, she couldn’t stop thinking about how Heath had swatted her. For some inexplicable reason, it was causing all sorts of butterflies in her tummy and an unusual awareness of her entire body, especially from her bottom to the private place between her legs, which pulsed with a strange new ache.

Chapter Seven

Heath was frustrated, but it was the best kind of frustration a man can have, and he welcomed it over the brooding sadness he'd felt off and on since Rose's death.

Willow silently flitted about his house and ducked out of rooms quickly, likely thinking she was inconspicuous, when in fact there wasn't a moment in which Heath did not feel or notice her presence. He gritted his teeth every time she bent over, stretching her tight trousers even tighter over her round, plump bottom. It wasn't much better when she reached up to open a window or dust a ledge, causing her breasts to bounce and her taut belly to become exposed.

He thought about buying her a dress one size too big and ordering her to wear it, but he abandoned that idea quickly. She was smart enough to figure out that his own lust and weakness would be the reason for wanting her to cover up. Also, he didn't want to change her or force her to conform to the appearance adopted by every other woman he knew. She was as unique as a star in the heavens, and to change her would be to dim her light. So Heath suffered his frustration as stoically as possible.

Each day he grew fonder of, and yet also more irritated by her. He liked to watch her interacting with his children. She was engaged with them, funny, and kind, answering their questions and involving them in her work. She was also nonchalant about their foibles and permissive to the point of absurdity, which had the annoying effect of making him seem especially strict and stuffy.

Her cooking skills improved—also something that resulted in him experiencing both fondness and frustration. He began to see her in a domestic light, which of course brought rumination over the possibility of marriage. That led to thinking about what he would like to do to her in bed. But coaxing the wild young woman to the altar or to his bed seemed an impossibility. He'd barely been able to get her to look at him without suspicion.

He loathed her tobacco habit. Despite him voicing his disapproval more than once, he would frequently catch her with a puffed cheek. She made no effort to hide the chew from him, but at least she would dutifully spit it out each time he held out the rag.

"One of these days, I'll punish you for this nasty habit. I'll welt you good," he threatened, tossing the spittle rag in a pile of dirty clothes.

She must have known he was joking because she smirked at him. "You really think you're man enough to punish me?"

"Want to test me, Trouble?"

She stared at him a moment before she shook her head and

looked away. All trace of humor was gone from her voice when she said, “The thing about you, Heath, is that unlike other men, you don’t have to act tough for me to know you are. I don’t want to test you.”

He studied her. “Was that a compliment?”

She shrugged. “If you think being tough is a compliment, then I suppose it was.”

“To any red-blooded man. Thank you.”

She turned to look at him, her expression a challenge. “Aren’t you going to return the compliment?”

He was caught off guard and unsure about how to respond. When he’d gathered his wits, he said, “I can’t think of only one thing to say in favor of you. You are a remarkable woman, through and through. A sweet, lovely, surprising young woman… with the chewing habit of a dirty old man.”

She laughed. It was a good laugh, full of mirth and abandon. Heath couldn’t help but laugh along with her. It was in that moment he realized he’d won her friendship, and he felt like he’d won the world.

Chapter Eight

On Heath's weekly trip to town, he bought the necessary supplies from the mercantile, then headed to the marshal's office, intending to tell Clyde that Willow was doing just fine at the ranch. He knew the marshal would be curious, and Heath wanted to give him credit for setting up the arrangement.

It was a hot day. The noontime sun beat down from overhead, seeming to burn through his Stetson, causing his scalp to itch. He wiped his brow with his blue kerchief as he ambled along the wooden walkway to the jailhouse.

He nodded and said, "Good afternoon," to the two young ladies who were walking toward him, Victoria Davis and Mary Appleton.

"Good afternoon, Mr. Wolfe," they replied in identical singsong voices. The taller one called Mary pumped her fan across her face. "Sure is a scorcher. You have much business in town?"

He inwardly cursed. The question obligated him to pause and answer, which he was loath to do. "Just finishing up. One more stop and then I can head home."

Victoria gave Heath a secret little smile, the kind that implied a more intimate relationship between them than actually existed. He knew why she smiled at him in that way, and it made him cringe.

Not long ago, he'd done her a favor, at her request, of helping get the ties on the back of her dress unstuck. The act had revealed to him the feminine contours of her neck and bare shoulders. When she turned around and tilted her head up, he saw in her eyes that the whole event had been staged, right down to their semi-private location behind the shop she owned, and she expected him to kiss her. When he'd stepped back in retreat of her advance, it had the effect of causing the light in her bright eyes to fade into a dull disappointment with a glimmer of outrage. "Pardon me, Miss Davis," he'd said. "I'm not too handy with lady duds." He'd fumbled with his hat intentionally, playing the part of a nervous, dim-witted cowboy out of his element in the face of such beauty. It was guile on his part, done to allow her to retain her pride, something she wouldn't have been able to do if he'd rejected her outright.

Seeing her now, smiling at him knowingly, he realized his ploy had worked. She looked at him with the smug satisfaction of a woman who assumed he was a hopeless male swayed by her feminine charms yet too awkward to act on them.

"You're welcome to come cool off at the shop," Victoria offered. "You can rest a spell, have some lemonade."

"Oh yes, do join us," Mary added. Her cheeks were flushed from the heat.

"Wish I could," he lied, "but I promised I'd be home for supper and I better keep moving. You ladies take care now." He tipped his hat and took a step.

"Have to get home to your hired help?" Victoria asked, her voice a soft, smooth sneer.

Heath halted, flooded with aggravation that crossed the border into anger, but it disappeared as quickly as it had come. His arrangement with Willow McAllister wasn't worth explaining to anyone. "That's right," he said. "She's cooking pot roast today, and she's darn fine at that. Wouldn't want to miss it." He walked away before they could speak to him further.

He became aware as he neared the jailhouse that he was sweating, not just from the heat but also as a result of the unexpected anger he'd felt upon hearing the subtle insult from Victoria.

"Get yourself together, cowboy," he muttered to himself. Who did he think he was? Willow's white knight with a duty to protect her honor at all costs? She'd never asked for that, and it wasn't as though what Victoria said wasn't true. Willow *was* his hired help, even if he felt more inclined to think of her as a friend and part of the family.

Heath reached the jailhouse. The curtains were drawn and there was a quietness about the place. He knew before he rattled the doorknob that it would be locked. He walked the short path to the end of town to see if Clyde was home.

His daughter Sadie opened the door. Her eyes and nose were red, and it was clear she had been crying. "Sadie, honey, what's wrong?" Heath asked.

She ran the back of her hand along her tear-stained cheek and stepped aside, wordlessly inviting him in. As Heath entered, he spotted the marshal's four-year-old daughter engaged in concentrated play with blocks on the floor. The house was in a state comfortable disarray, indicating a place well-lived-in and bustling with activity. The smell of chicken wafted in from the kitchen.

"I'm alright, Mr. Wolfe," Sadie said with a wavering voice. "My pa ain't here. Grace and the twins ran off, and he's out searching for them. When he gets home, I'll tell him you stopped by, if you like."

"That's fine, Sadie. I'm sorry to hear about the children. Any thought about where they might go?"

There was a slight shift in her eyes before she looked down at her feet. "I didn't tell my pa this. I thought about it after he left. I think they might be headed to your place. I talked an awful lot about your nice kitchen and how big the barn is. They might try to hide out there."

"Why did they run away?"

She sighed deeply, like a weary old woman rather than a young

girl. “I might have gotten sore at them. It’s just a lot for me to do with them being here, and they don’t help at all.”

“Anyone can understand that. Don’t blame yourself for them running off.”

“Thanks,” she said, and glanced up at him. “I hope my pa doesn’t blame me too much.”

He offered her a smile. “Your pa knows what a fine girl you are. I don’t think he’ll blame you.”

She smiled weakly back at him, but she didn’t look convinced.

Heath headed home in his wagon, hauling the supplies he’d packed from the mercantile. By the time he arrived at the cabin, the heat of the day was at an all-time high. He unhooked his horse and set her to pasture, making sure the trough was filled with water. He walked inside the house and found Willow sitting near an open window, fanning her face.

She glanced at him without a smile, then returned to staring out the window.

There was something odd and reserved about her that took Heath by surprise. “Hello, Trouble. You alright?”

“Yes.”

Heath continued to observe her a moment. Usually when he called her Trouble, he could spot the hint of a smile that she always tried to hide, but this time no trace of amusement could be seen on her features.

He remembered the news he needed to share. “Say, the marshal’s young’uns took off, and Sadie thought they might head here. You haven’t seen them, have you?”

“I haven’t,” she said shortly. Before Heath could speak to her further, she stood abruptly and walked down the hall to her room.

It wasn’t until after supper that Heath realized she’d lied to him. He saw her shove a loaf of bread into a sack when she thought he wasn’t looking, and it was then that he put it together that the marshal’s children were somewhere near and she was going to feed them.

It puzzled him why she hadn’t told him the truth, but he didn’t waste time dwelling on it. He knew the marshal was likely worried, and he intended to load those children up in the wagon and take them straight home.

Heath followed Willow to the barn. She walked to the corner where an oil lamp was lit, revealing the three small shadows huddled next to the hay. As she was handing the bread to the children, he came up upon them.

He addressed the children straight away, his voice seeming especially loud in the quiet space. “Well now, I know hay can make a

tolerable place to rest your head in a crunch, but there are beds for sleeping at your home, so you won't be spending the night here. On your feet."

Willow gasped and whirled around, while the children stood. One of the boys said, "We don't belong there, sir. We ain't the marshal's blood like Sadie and Ada." The other boy and the girl nodded and mumbled their agreement.

"They don't want to go back, Heath," Willow added emphatically. "Why should they have to return to the marshal's house if they don't want to?"

"Why? Because it's where they live," Heath said, astonished. He didn't know what she was thinking. Did she believe the marshal's children could spend the rest of their childhood holed up in the barn? Addressing the runaways, he said, "You three finish your bread while I hook up the wagon."

"No!" Willow cried. She placed herself between the children and Heath and stared up at him defiantly. Her eyes flashed. "I won't allow you to take them back where they will be mistreated and beaten. The marshal doesn't want them. They should be allowed to stay until we can find them a more suitable home."

"Now look here, Willow McAllister," Heath said firmly. "You have it in your head one way about the marshal, but you're out-and-out wrong. I know he he'd sooner break his hand than raise it on a child."

A long silence followed in which Heath and Willow glared at each other, neither willing to back down.

Finally, the girl named Grace moved to stand next to Willow. She touched her hand. "It's not the marshal," she said softly. "It's Sadie who don't want us there."

Heath could almost see the wheels turning in Willow's head. She first looked confused, then upset, and finally her gaze softened with understanding. Her shoulders stooped in a humble pose after realizing her mistaken assumption about the children's reason for running away. "I'll go get Jack and Bitty ready for bed," she mumbled.

Heath watched her leave. When she was out of his view, he grabbed the halter that was slung over its hook on the wall and addressed the children. "You can tell the marshal your troubles and work it out with Sadie. Sometimes it's hard being part of a family, but that's no reason to run away. Now y'all stay put until I get the mare hooked up, you hear?"

Resigned to their fate, three heads nodded and murmured, "Yessir," in matching subdued tones.

As Heath finished hooking the mare to the wagon for the second time that day, he heard the clip-clopping of hooves

approaching quickly. He guessed it was Clyde, coming to pick up his brood after learning from Sadie where they might be.

As he suspected, it was the marshal who hopped down. "Howdy, Heath. I see you're fixin' up the wagon. Am I right that my children are here and you're of the mind to take them home?"

"Yup, you're right."

Clyde closed his eyes and let out a long sigh of relief. He shook his head and relaxed his shoulders. Then his face hardened. "Where are they?"

Heath tilted his head in the direction of the barn. Clyde strode in. Heath couldn't make out the words of the dressing-down that took place then, but he could imagine the gist of it, and he was secretly thankful Willow had excused herself before hearing the marshal's bellowing. Clyde was a man few dared to cross, and he could deliver a scolding that would cause the bravest child's eyes to sting. When they finally emerged, the boys were sniffling, and the girl was outright crying.

Clyde walked ahead of them to where Heath was leaning against the wagon. "I'd be much obliged if I could borrow your rig to get these naughty young'uns home. I'll bring it back with my deputy tomorrow at first light."

"'Course," Heath said. "I don't need it tomorrow, so you can take your time."

The wagon ambled away, with the marshal's horse tied to the back, one wheel squeaking conspicuously in the silence of the warm evening. Heath continued to stare in the distance long after they'd disappeared from his sight.

The cabin was quiet when he entered. Jack and Bitty were settled in their rooms, and a quick glance in the kitchen told him Willow was too. He walked to her room and knocked.

"Come in," she said, her voice meek.

He opened the door. "Here's the thing, Willow," he said, offering no greeting as he strode in. He closed the door behind him. "Perhaps being an orphan yourself, you thought it necessary to stand up for those young'uns, and that's admirable. But you'd do well to learn the truth before pointing your gun and firing."

She looked up at him from where she was sitting cross-legged on the bed. She had changed into her nightgown, attire that looked markedly feminine compared to her usual. It was an ankle-length slip of light white cotton that brought out the tan in her arms and face. Her feet were bare, giving her a touching appearance of vulnerability. She'd let out her dark hair from the single braid she usually wore. The black tresses fell in waves around her shoulders. The effect of her flowing hair and sleeping gown was so stunning, Heath had to stifle a

sharp breath of desire.

"You're right, Heath. It was foolish of me to assume I knew the problem, without even querying the children."

Heath walked to the desk and pulled out the chair to take a seat in front of her. "It takes a fine person to admit when they're wrong."

"Thank you. I don't feel so fine at the moment. I feel a right fool."

"You're not a fool," he said gently, "but I must admit you have offended me, darlin'."

She looked distressed. "How?"

"I thought we were becoming friends, but you didn't trust me enough to tell me about the children being here. If you think I would return them to a man who would mistreat them, you must not think well of me at all."

She looked at him for a long time, her soulful eyes moving from side to side as she gazed into each of his. He held her gaze until she eventually looked away. Shaking her head, she said, "Now that you put it that way, I should have known. You wouldn't let anyone be mistreated."

He felt the nearly irresistible urge to take hold of her sweet little body, turn her over his knee, and give her a good spanking. Either that, or kiss her soundly. She seemed to deserve both equally. Instead, he reached out and took her small hand in his. "Then give me the courtesy of trusting me in the future, won't you?"

She didn't pull her hand away and instead seemed to lean toward him. "I can't say as I'm used to trusting anyone but myself. But I will try to trust you, Heath."

"That's all I can ask for." He squeezed her hand gently and rubbed his thumb over her delicate wrist.

He wasn't sure, but it sounded like she drew a sharp breath, and he wondered if she felt the same strong desire for him that he felt for her. Before he could think on it further, she tugged her hand toward her, and he released it. He stood and scooted the chair back to its place at the desk. He reached for the doorknob.

"Heath…"

His hand stilled, and he looked back at her. "Yes?"

She opened her mouth, closed it, and then opened it again. He waited patiently until she was able to say what she wanted.

"I think very highly of you. And… If you thought half as highly of me as I do of you, I would be pleased."

He smiled at her, relieved that his belief in their friendship hadn't been something falsely construed in his own head. "Then you should be doubly pleased, honey. I hold you in high regard." He wanted to say more. He wanted to tell her she was beautiful, that he

admired her courage in defending the children, and that she was the one person who had managed to make him laugh since his wife had died.

Instead, he left, closing the door softly behind him.

Chapter Nine

The agreed-upon trial period of one month passed. Neither Willow nor Heath made mention of it, and soon two months had passed. The sweltering summer came to an end, and the leaves on the trees began to change colors, turning from green to golden before falling to the ground.

Their days were routine. Heath took off for the range after an early breakfast, not returning until dusk, and Bitty and Jack rode Ashton to school and back again every day. Only Willow had no place to go, leaving her to occupy herself alone in the cabin.

Work was never in short supply. Her days were filled from sunup to sundown baking bread, churning butter, washing clothes, and the hundreds of other tasks required to run a household. Though her hands were occupied, her mind was not, and she found a restlessness growing inside of her that she knew could lead to trouble.

She thought about telling Heath she was bored. She even formed the words she would say to him in her mind, requesting that he give her some time off to spend in town, but she could not bring herself to speak the words out loud. She worried that by telling him how she felt, she would be upsetting the balance of a very good thing. She was happy at the ranch, mostly, and she figured it would be better to squash the wild streak in herself that threatened to surface, rather than tell Heath about it and acknowledge its existence.

But in trying to subdue her restlessness, it seemed only to grow. As the days passed, she grew more irritable. Soon her comfortable existence seemed nearly unbearable, and Heath's politeness toward her was maddening. Her feelings for him had grown stronger than she'd ever experienced for a man. She thought often about how he'd taken her hand in his and brushed her wrist with his thumb. It had caused her such a rush of excitement she'd been nearly frantic. Every day since then, she found herself wishing he would hold her hand again. She imagined him kissing her, and she even imagined him spanking her like the one time he'd swatted her in the kitchen. She would have welcomed any of that over his infuriating politeness.

One Saturday morning, when her restlessness was at an all-time high, Willow prepared the family's favorite breakfast of flapjacks and molasses with bacon. She stood over the stove in a new apron she'd managed to sew using bright blue material from the back of the family's storage closet. When she wore it the first time, Heath had complimented her on it, saying it was nice to see her wearing something other than brown.

It had been an offhand comment, but it left Willow with the desire to wear more of what would please him. She even considered

sewing a pretty dress for herself, if she ever found the time. But her days were filled from dawn to dusk with other work that seemed more pressing.

The bacon sizzled in the pan, the flapjacks bubbled. Heath sat at the table, silently drinking from his coffee mug without removing his eyes from the newspaper in his hand. Willow had come to learn that before coffee, Heath was as conversational as a grizzly bear, and about as growly too.

Willow knew better than to fill her own coffee mug until later. It would go cold in the time it took her to serve everyone breakfast. She felt uncommonly annoyed by that on this morning. She needed coffee to lift her from her bad mood. During her moods, she daydreamed about running away to town, catching up with her old friends, the "bad seeds" as the marshal called them, and getting drunk from laughter and whiskey. It seemed to be the medicine she needed to cure her of her growing feelings for a man who remained mostly indifferent toward her.

Willow's thoughts were interrupted by the children, who argued loudly about whether Bitty could join Jack and his friends to play Capture the Flag. "You don't know how to play," Jack insisted. "You can stay here and play dolls or something."

"That's boring!" Bitty exclaimed. "I do too know how to play. It's not that hard. You run around and try to find a flag."

Willow dropped flapjacks on the children's plates, causing the argument to pause while they ate. She added three flapjacks to Heath's plate along with two strips of bacon. He didn't look up and continued to read the paper while eating his breakfast.

The bickering soon resumed where it had left off. Bitty's voice turned plaintive and whining, while Jack's grew louder and more insistent. They both crossed their arms and scowled at each other. Heath folded his newspaper and stood just as Willow was sitting to have her breakfast.

When Bitty's eyes filled with tears, Heath groaned and finally intervened in the children's squabble. "Bitty, if Jack wants to go play with his friends without you, that's his right. You have your own friends. Now stop whining. And Jack, you might consider taking your sister along sometime. It would be the nice thing to do."

"Yeah, it would be nice!" Bitty parroted.

Jack sighed like a longsuffering parent. "Fine, but not this time."

"When, though?" she wailed.

"Enough, Bitty," Heath said with a slightly raised voice. "I don't want to hear another word about this. Go outside and play."

Bitty let out another wail and fled out the back door. Jack

grunted and left the table too, heading for his room.

Heath turned his attention to Willow. “All that arguing… You don’t have to wait for me to say something. You can tell them to stop arguing as well as I can.”

Willow took a sip of her coffee. It was cold, even though she’d left it in the pot and waited to pour it until she could actually drink it. She felt irritated by the cold coffee and by Heath’s comment. “Why should I be the one to say something? I told you the very first day that I didn’t see myself minding children.”

When she looked up, she found him glaring at her. “I wasn’t aware you still felt that way,” he said.

She shrugged. “Nothing has changed. I’m not their mother. I’m the hired help. And by the way, hired help usually has time off. I have worked every day for two months, and I need some rest.”

“I know how long you’ve been here. You might have told me you needed some rest instead of allowing that bee to buzz in your bonnet.”

“I just told you, didn’t I?” she retorted.

His jaw clenched in a rare sign of annoyance. He walked to the mat by the door and grabbed his boots. “Then consider tomorrow your day off. Get yourself gaited on out of here and go to town. I’ll stay home with the children.”

“Fine.”

When he finished pulling on his boots, he strode out the door without another word.

Willow pushed her plate of flapjacks away. A day off would do her good, she supposed, but she wished it hadn’t been arranged with Heath so contentiously. She could have just asked him, and he would have said yes.

The problem was, asking him for something seemed impossible. She worried that once she started, she wouldn’t be able to stop. *Please, Heath, will you give me a day off? And while you’re at it, will you also give me some attention, love, and your undying devotion?*

She scoffed at her own foolishness. A man like Heath would never be attracted to a woman like her, even if he *was* on the lookout for a woman, which he’d clearly said in the beginning he wasn’t. She needed to settle for the way things were, as tough as that might be, because as difficult as it was to be near Heath the way things were, the thought of *not* being near him at all was unbearable.

The following day, after breakfast, Heath met her by the front door. “All set to go, Trouble?”

She looked up from where she was buckling her shoes. “Just about.” She tried not to smile. She loved it when he called her Trouble, though she wasn’t sure why. It wasn’t exactly a compliment.

He reached out and pulled down her shawl from where it was hanging on the hook by the door. Handing it to her, he said, “It’s a cool morning. Probably should wear this.”

She finished buckling her shoes, stood, and accepted the shawl, warmed by the simple gesture.

He opened the door and placed his hand on her back to escort her outside. The touch sent hot prickles up and down her spine. Even when he dropped his hand, the ghost of his touch remained a hot memory.

“I saddled Ashton for you so you don’t have to walk to town,” he said.

Willow observed the groomed and saddled horse tied to the hitching post. It felt good, the way Heath was taking care of her. Of course, he had been taking care of her for months now, providing shelter and sustenance, but the nature of his care this morning felt more meaningful.

He walked with her to the horse. His voice was serious when he said, “Please be home before sundown, alright, Willow? Let me give you a leg up.”

She bent her knee and allowed him to grasp her lower leg to hoist her up. After she’d settled on the horse and gathered the reins in her hand, she said, “It’s not really a day off if I can’t stay out after sundown. That’s when the good time begins.”

“Not for you,” he replied firmly. “I don’t want you riding home in the dark all alone. There are bears and wildcats along that trail, plus nothing good happens after dark on the streets of Thorndale.”

“But I can stay the night in the livery, like I used to do.” She was joking, but she wanted to get a rise out of him. It annoyed her that he was giving her a curfew. She hadn’t actually planned to stay out past dark, but now that he was ordering her not to, her rebellious streak roared to life.

“No, Willow,” he answered seriously. “No staying in the livery. I want you home before sundown. Is that clear?”

She looked down into his hard, handsome face. She hadn’t seen this side of Heath. Usually he would trade smart remarks with her, but he was being uncommonly stern. “Why are you being this way, Heath? You’re so… serious.”

“Because I want to leave no room for doubt in your mind. We’ve become friends, and I’m pleased about that, but let’s not forget why you came here to the ranch in the first place.”

She scowled at him. “What do you mean?”

“Don’t feign ignorance about our arrangement. You know the marshal tasked me with straightening you out. You haven’t needed any of that from me thus far, but this is the first time you’ll be alone

in town since you came to live here. I don't want you getting up to any of your old mischief."

She scoffed. "Thanks for the vote of confidence. And if I don't follow this rule to come home before sundown? What will you do, fire me and tell the marshal?"

Heath's eyes narrowed. "Don't be ridiculous. I will not fire you. But I will discipline you."

"How?" The question came out in a nervous squeak.

He rubbed his stubbled cheek. "Well, let's see. How about this? I'll march you to the barn and give you a thrashing you'll never forget. You'll be sleeping bottom-up for a few nights."

She was surprised by that. Heath had never indicated he would inflict serious corporal punishment, though she remembered the swat he'd landed when she fibbed to him. Studying him, she said, "You—you wouldn't really, would you? You never hit your children."

"No, but you're not a child, are you? You're a grown woman with a hankerin' for mischief. I'd have no problem spanking some sense into you."

She stared at him, trying to find words to protest, but she could think of nothing.

"Willow, say you'll be a good girl and do as I ask," Heath said, his voice gentler than before. "More than anything, I care about your safety. That's why I'm being such a hard case about you coming home."

She bit her bottom lip and shrugged, trying to appear nonchalant. "Alright, fine. Can I go now?"

He shook his head and reached out to gather the horse's reins below the bit, preventing her from leaving. "Say the words, 'I'll be good. I'll come home before sundown as you've requested'."

She could feel the warmth gathering on her cheeks as she considered her options. It seemed absurd to repeat the words like a compliant child. On the other hand, if she did so, Heath would allow her to leave and then she would be free to wrestle with her pride alone.

Squaring her shoulders, she said the embarrassing words quickly. "I'll be good. I'll come home before sundown. Now will you let me go?"

He smiled and released the reins. "Have a hog-killin' time, honey."

"Thanks a lot," she said, tossing her braid over her shoulder.

She nudged the horse with her heels into a smart trot and headed toward town, her mind full of Heath's threat of giving her a thrashing. She waited for her outrage to increase, but it quelled instead. As embarrassing as it was to be threatened with a spanking, it

did nothing to mitigate her feelings for Heath. If anything, it made her feel like maybe he cared for her more than he let on. Her eyes began to sting, and it wasn't until she reached town that she pushed her conflicting thoughts aside.

Chapter Ten

Twenty-four hours later

Willow's head ached and pounded with every beat of her heart. She shivered. The air was cool, and she was curled up in the fetal position on a hard surface. Coarse material covered her. She felt it with half-numb fingers and realized it was a thin wool blanket, not the fluffy cotton quilt on her bed at the ranch. Her stomach roiled. She heard a mournful groan and barely recognized that it had come from her own throat.

After prying her eyes open, the first thing she spotted was a chamber pot. Next to it was a wooden table with a white pitcher full of water and a small tin cup. Beyond that were metal bars. That's when she realized she was in jail. She hadn't made it back to the ranch before sunset. She hadn't made it back at all.

The events of the previous evening slowly fell into place, with large gaps between them. Lots of whiskey. Laughter. Cards. Slurred words and wobbling walks. Songs sung out of key. She groaned again when the marshal entered her memory. She recalled two images of his face floating in front of her.

She closed her eyes again, wishing the ache in her head would go away. The next thing she knew, a clanging sound was entering her dreams. It was the blacksmith, standing next to her and whacking heated iron into the shape of a horseshoe. Then the blacksmith vanished, and the marshal appeared, banging keys against metal bars. She was no longer dreaming. She sat up on the cot as Marshal Clyde Shaw walked in holding a bowl of mush.

He handed it to her. "I'll say this for Heath, you stayed out of trouble for two whole months."

Hearing Heath's name brought such a rush of anguish, she couldn't speak right away. When she did, her voice sounded hoarse and foreign. "Why am I in jail?"

"For your own safety. You didn't vandalize anything this time. My deputy saw Heath's horse trotting away toward the ranch with no rider, so I searched for you. Found you behind the saloon passed out. No money in your possession. I'm guessing you were robbed at some point, but it doesn't seem like anything worse than that happened."

Willow noticed that light was streaming through the small barred window into the jail cell. Judging by the intensity of the sun's rays, it was well after sunrise. She was afraid to ask her next question. "Heath…" she began, but her voice trailed off.

"He stopped by this morning when you were asleep. Said he would run errands and return later. You might want to wait here. He

didn't mention to me what his plan was. If he doesn't want you to work at the ranch anymore because of your reckless behavior, you and I will need to have a very serious discussion about your future, young lady."

The marshal left, closing the door to the metal cage behind him. He didn't lock it, and Willow knew she was free to leave. But she could think of no place she wanted to go other than to the ranch. She opted to wait for Heath and pray that he would take her home.

She set the mush aside and poured herself some water from the pitcher into the tin cup. The cool liquid soothed her burning throat but did nothing to help the nausea. She cleaned herself up as best she could, scrubbing her face and hands using the remaining water in the pitcher. She raked her fingers through her long dark hair and braided it in a single plait down her back.

The menial tasks were effective in keeping her mind from focusing fully on her greatest fear. She was terrified Heath would want nothing to do with her now. She'd not only broken her promise to return before sunset, she had also made a drunken fool of herself.

She thought about what had happened the night before. She recalled noticing that the sun was setting and thinking she should get home. But her friend Johnny, whom she hadn't seen since she'd started working on the ranch, convinced her to have one drink with him outside the saloon. He'd promised it wouldn't take more than ten minutes and then she could be on her way.

Her apprehension over Heath's threat of punishment had dwindled after one drink, and she was enjoying her freedom so much that she'd had another, and another. When she realized there was no way she would make it back before sunset, she decided she might as well enjoy her time if she was going to get in trouble anyway.

Still, she'd had no intention of liquoring up to the point where she wouldn't be able to return to the ranch at all, and she wondered how the horse had ended up getting loose. Had she tried to mount while inebriated and spooked her?

It didn't matter. She'd messed up in a big way, and she couldn't think of a single good excuse or reason. With every minute that passed without Heath coming to see her, her fear grew stronger. By the time several hours had gone by, her headache and nausea had diminished, but her fear and sadness were at an all-time high.

What she wouldn't give to take it all back! She wished she hadn't even accepted Heath's offer to take a day to herself. She wished she had spent the day with the children. Thinking about Jack and Bitty brought a lump to her throat. What were they doing? Did they notice she was gone, and did they miss her like she missed them?

It wasn't until late in the afternoon, after the marshal had

insisted she drink a bitter-tasting liquid meant to be a hangover cure, that she heard the rough baritone of Heath's voice coming from the front of the jailhouse. She couldn't make out the words spoken between the marshal and Heath, but they were likely about whether Heath would take responsibility for her again.

She was overcome with a terrible feeling of hope—terrible because she knew it was likely useless to hope that Heath would give her another chance. Tears filled her eyes. She wouldn't be able to bear it if he wanted nothing to do with her now.

By the time Heath came striding into her cell, the tears were streaming down her face. He looked down at her with a mild expression, hands on his hips. She hiccupped and stared into his eyes, waiting for the verdict.

He didn't make her wait long. "Well? You want to come home now? Or do you fancy staying in the marshal's fine hotel a bit longer?"

The relief that washed over her caused more tears. She stood from the hard cot and walked to him with her head bowed and shoulders stooped, sniffling. "I want to go home, Heath."

"Come along, then, Trouble." He pivoted and strode out of the cell. She followed him outside and to the buggy. When he wordlessly offered her a hand up, she accepted it. His calloused fingers clasped hers, and she squeezed them tight on her ascent, drawing strength from his touch.

Once they were both seated, Heath said, "'Y'yup!" to the horse, and the buggy lurched forward.

Willow held on to the railing until she'd caught her balance, then let go and fidgeted with her hands in her lap. The only sounds for the next half-mile were the crunching of the wheels along the dirt and puffs of air from the horse.

She wished Heath would say something to her. She wanted him to yell at her, tell her she was a terrible disappointment, tell her he was angry with her—anything but the pervasive silence. She couldn't guess what he was thinking, but a glance at his face told her he was more unhappy with her than he'd let on at the jail. His jaw was hard, his eyes narrow.

"Are you angry with me, Heath?" she asked, her voice small.

He didn't respond.

Willow sighed and looked at the grass shuddering over the rolling hills. The air against her cheek felt like freedom. She hadn't realized how stale it was in the jail until she was away from it. How could she have thought she was freer in her previous lifestyle? Living in the comfort of a home with people who cared about her—that was true freedom. She never wanted to end up in trouble again.

"I wouldn't blame you if you were angry," she said. "Matter of fact, I'm surprised you're even bringing me home. I thought you'd be done with me. I thought you wouldn't want me working for you anymore."

He looked over at her and finally spoke. "Is that what you would prefer? Be done with me and the children? Go back to your old life?"

"No," she said, shaking her head emphatically. "As I was sitting in the cell, the only thing I wanted was to see you and the children. I made a vow to myself never to drink or chew or play cards again."

"Don't make vows you can't keep, Willow, even to yourself," he said sharply.

Chastened, she quieted, but the silence between them was painful. After some time watching the muscles rippling under the haunches of the horse pulling the buggy, she said, "I wish you would yell at me or something."

He didn't respond right away. When he did, his voice was quiet. "I'm not much of a yeller, but if you recall, I did promise you a spanking."

She swallowed. "I remember."

"You do, huh? Did you forget last night? Spankings hurt, you know. It would have been wise for you to avoid getting one."

Her bottom cheeks clenched, and her tummy gave a strange little flip. She thought back to how she'd dismissed her fear of punishment after a drink. Now that the threat was close to becoming a reality, she wondered about her own sanity. "I guess I didn't think about it very seriously. Honestly, I lost track of time. I wasn't intentionally going against your wishes."

He grunted. "That will not make me more lenient on you. I gave you a simple order to return at a decent hour, and you not only failed to do that, you also didn't come home at all."

Her eyes drifted to Heath's large hand holding the reins loosely. Would he thrash her with an open palm, or would he whip her with a strip of leather? She was afraid to ask.

When the horse pulled the buggy in front of the cabin, she climbed down and looked longingly at the front door. She felt torn between wanting to get the punishment over with and wanting to spend some time in her room to get her mind wrapped around the idea.

Heath didn't give her a choice. "Come here, Willow."

She drew a deep breath and walked to him, feeling like her boots were made of lead. Finding it hard to look at him, she kept her head bent. She was resigned to her fate and willing to accept punishment. Despite her apprehension, she knew Heath wouldn't be

cruel, and she was used to discomfort. Would a spanking be any worse than going hungry for a few days? She didn't think so. She stopped in front of him and looked down at his dusty boots.

"I don't want to do this, but I made a promise," he said.

She said nothing, but nodded her understanding in the direction of the ground.

He took hold of her hand. He walked toward the barn with her in tow and entered through the back door. It was still light outside, but the barn was dim and shadowed by the slats of stalls. A pitchfork jutted out from a pile of hay that nearly reached the ceiling. The milk cow mooed upon seeing them, and the mare Willow had ridden to town nickered at them before dipping her head and resuming her meal of alfalfa. Though occupied by her thoughts of the impending punishment, vaguely Willow felt grateful that Ashton was safe despite her negligence.

Heath continued to hold her hand as he looked around for something in the shadows. His gaze stopped at a large, unused trough propped against the barn wall. He released her long enough to pull the trough out, shove it upside down, and sit on the flat surface.

With a firm tug, he pulled her to him, swiftly planting her upturned bottom over his right leg and her stomach over his left. With a squawk, she clawed the air for balance.

"I've got you. Hands on the ground," he said, holding her firmly against him.

She whimpered and obeyed, lowering her arms until her palms connected with the straw-covered ground. Despite being in a position for punishment, she was comfortable lying across Heath's lap. Her body's softness seemed to mold around his thighs, and his hold on her was secure.

He landed a hard spank across her trouser-clad bottom. Before she knew it, he had landed four more, alternating between cheeks. There was force behind the swats, each one causing her to lurch forward and let out a small yelp. She would have leapt off his lap if his hand weren't so firmly planted against her hip, pulling her body tight against his stomach.

When he paused, she took a large gulp of air. "That really hurts."

"It's supposed to." He rubbed her bottom in a circle. "You're not across my lap for a good time, young lady."

Her breath caught. Heath's touch on her bottom and his words felt good, somehow. They made her want to accept the intimacy, the scolding, and the spanking itself, and to prove that she could be good like he wanted.

"To answer your question from before," he said, "I *am* very

angry with you. It scared me half to death when you didn't come home. I thought something terrible had happened to you."

She looked back at him over her shoulder. His jaw was hard and his eyes locked with hers. She licked her dry lips. "I'm sorry I made you angry, Heath. I wasn't trying to."

"I'm sure you weren't. There wasn't much thought at all to how you behaved, was there?"

"No," she admitted, and returned her gaze to the ground.

"And you agree this punishment is what you deserve, Willow?"

She nodded.

He spanked her once, hard. "While you're over my lap getting your naughty bottom tanned, you'll answer with 'yes, sir' and 'no, sir'. Your lack of respect for authority has landed you here, and I want some proof this punishment is doing something to mend that. Is that understood?"

"Yes, sir!" she exclaimed, squeezing her eyes shut. His voice was sterner than she'd ever heard it. Reconciling this side of Heath with the man who had been so patient with her was swirling in her mind. She'd known there was a tougher side, the side of the man who wore a scar across his hand and commanded the respect of all the cowboys at his ranch. She hadn't seen him being so stern with anyone else, probably because no one else had dared to disobey him so recklessly. Her only desire was to submit to him and make him pleased with her once again. She hoped she hadn't ruined everything.

Resuming the swats at a brisk pace, he continued his lecture, "I was worried you had forgotten my role in this arrangement, and you proved my worries were valid. I don't appreciate you giving so little thought to my order. You forgot that I'm your boss and you must mind me."

"I didn't forget!" she protested, though she had a little. She had grown to like and respect Heath for his patience and good humor, and she hadn't expected him to morph into a strict disciplinarian.

"Don't. Lie. To. Me." He punctuated each word with a heavy spank.

She remained still, forcing herself to accept the hard swats. Though difficult to endure, she knew she deserved every one.

"How many times have I given you an order?" he asked with a raised voice, while continuing to rain down swats on her already well-warmed bottom.

She couldn't focus on the question in the midst of such discomfort. When the spanks became harder, she knew he was punishing her for delaying to answer him. She cried out, "I don't know how many times. I can't think."

"Try," he said, unsympathetically, layering swats on the spot

where her bottom met her thighs.

"I can only think of one time! Yesterday morning when you ordered me home before sundown."

He stopped spanking, and she let out a sigh of relief, daring to hope her answer was correct.

"That's right, young lady. In the two months you've been here, I've given you one order. One!" *Smack.* "I hardly think it was too much for me to expect you to follow the one thing I've asked of you." *Smack!*

She shook her head. "No, Heath, it wasn't."

"Are you ever going to disobey me again?"

"No, sir."

He grunted. "Why should I believe you? You promised me your obedience yesterday, and we both know what happened."

She felt chagrined. "It was only because of the whiskey that I disobeyed you. I got careless. I won't drink again, and that will help me make the right choices."

He rubbed her sore bottom in circles, causing Willow to experience a strange sensation of pleasure. She felt so small and helpless, but she also felt like she was right where she deserved to be, being punished over Heath's knee like a naughty little girl. If anyone was worthy of her respect and obedience, it was Heath, and she'd given him neither yesterday.

"I don't think you need to give up whiskey altogether," he said. "How about you agree to only drink with me until I can trust you again?"

"That's fair," she said. "I will do whatever you say, anything to earn your trust." She looked back at him over her shoulder. "You have treated me well, and I betrayed you. I won't again."

She hoped to see a softening in his expression. But his look was hard, and it was clear he was unmoved by her promise. "We'll see. Talk is cheap, especially when you're in the middle of a punishment."

That hurt her feelings. His opinion of her mattered, and tears sprang to her eyes. Looking down at the ground, she whimpered, "You hate me, don't you? I've failed you."

"What?" he exclaimed. "I don't hate you, Willow."

Tears flowed from her eyes. She wanted desperately to believe him, but in that moment she felt so ashamed and unworthy of his good opinion. "Talk is cheap, as you say," she said, her voice quivering.

He laughed then, which might have caused the mood to lighten, if his chuckle didn't sound so dark and ominous. "That was a very silly thing to say to me, darlin', especially in your current position. I'm doing a lot more than talking, if you hadn't noticed." He

hooked his fingers in the waist of her trousers and tugged them down, baring her bottom.

Chapter Eleven

She let out a half-yell, half-squeal and twisted frantically, shocked by the sudden exposure. He tightened his hand around her hip and kept her planted on his lap as he continued pushing the trousers down her legs until they were bunched at her ankles.

"A spanking on your bare bottom will be much more effective. Now stop your thrashing about, or I'm going to take off my belt and paint some stripes."

Willow settled down, but remained tense, wondered what he thought about seeing the slopes of her naked bottom. Then she realized he might be seeing even more than that. A surge of humiliation overtook her that made her tears flow faster. "Please, Heath," she choked out. "It's wrong, me being exposed like this." Her face flamed. She could hardly breathe. There was no way she could endure the embarrassment of being naked from the waist down over his knee, let alone the pain that would soon be in tandem with it.

He spanked her bare cheeks a few times, not hard, more like he was trying to get a feel for his target. "There's nothing wrong with a naughty girl getting her pretty little bottom spanked. What's wrong is to accuse the man who cares about you of actually *hating* you." He landed a mighty swat to emphasize his point. "That wasn't wise."

"I don't know why I said that," she wailed. "I know it's not true."

"I suspect it's because you need proof. And you're going to get enough of that, Trouble."

She moaned, feeling foolish for saying what she had, but also unburdened. She was relieved that he no longer sounded angry, and she dared to hope he truly cared about her.

She had no time to reflect on it. The most embarrassing part of the punishment ensued. She felt her supple skin flatten and bounce with every stroke of his hand. As it continued for what seemed like ages, her thoughts scattered, and all she could do was focus on getting through each swat. The humiliation faded, replaced fully with pain.

He paused after what seemed like an eternity. "After this punishment, will you behave like the smart young lady you are, not like a drunken sailor—chewing, gambling, and staggering around all night without care for your safety?"

"Yes," she agreed with a squeal.

"Yes, *sir*," he corrected.

"Yes, sir!"

Whap whap whap in measured strokes across her poor exposed cheeks. She must have suffered two dozen more whacks before she let out a long wail. The pain was building to a level she previously would

have thought impossible. His palm felt like solid wood, and she was sure bruises were forming. He didn't let up, even a little, for a long time, and it seemed to her the spanking would last forever.

"Please stop!" she cried. She gasped for air and clung to two handfuls of straw she'd gathered from the ground at some point. "I can't take anymore!"

His hand settled on her trembling cheeks. "You can, and you will, but I'll give you a chance to calm down. Take some deep breaths."

Her mind raced, trying to think of the right combination of words to convince him she'd had enough punishment. She couldn't think of anything to say besides exactly what she felt. "It hurts. Oh, it hurts so very badly, Heath."

"It has to hurt for you understand how serious it is to put yourself in danger. I never want to punish you like this again." His voice was not without kindness, but he was firm in his intention to continue. "For the rest of this spanking, think about what a good girl you're going to be from now on so you don't end up over my lap again."

After the break, which seemed entirely too brief, he resumed the discipline, causing her to buck and twist uselessly in his lap. His focus and hold on her was such that her poor bottom barely moved an inch and didn't evade a single stroke. Without thinking, she reached a hand back to protect her seat, but he trapped it against her lower back without missing a beat.

She lost all sense of modestly, and at some point she kicked off the trousers from where they'd been bunched at her ankles. Her legs flailed wildly in the air, and she didn't care that she was giving him an unrestricted view between her legs that no man had ever seen before. She was in a horrid state of pain, and just when she thought she couldn't bear another swat, another would come, and then another after that.

He was punishing her much more severely than she would have guessed he would, but at no point did she think he was being unfair. She deserved every painful swat, and she hoped by the end he would forgive her.

He stopped eventually, long past the point at which she didn't think she could take it anymore. She collapsed over his lap, trying with little success to control the flow of tears. She didn't think it was possible to cry so hard. Usually she could control herself, but the spanking had taken away all inhibitions.

She became aware that Heath's left hand, which had so firmly gripped her in place during the spanking, was rubbing and patting her back. His punishing hand now gentle, he soothed her scorched skin.

“There, there, Trouble. We’re done.”

She took in a shuddering breath. “Do you forgive me?” she asked, needing to know the answer right away.

“Of course, sweetheart. Come, let me hold you.” He helped her stand and then pulled her to sit on his lap. Her burning, naked bottom connected with the rough wool of his trousers, and she winced. Tears continued to flow, and she sniffled and hiccupped helplessly.

“*Shh*, it’s alright, darlin’,” Heath said, wrapping his arms around her. “I know I was hard on you, but it’s all over now.”

She buried her face against his chest. Her voice muffled, she said, “I never thought you would spank me so hard.”

His arms tightened around her. “That’s why I had to. I can’t have you thinking I won’t lay down the law when your safety is at stake.” He continued to rub her back, murmuring words of comfort. Handing her a clean handkerchief, he asked, “Why did you disobey me?”

“I don’t know,” she said, wiping her eyes. She blew her nose and looked down, suddenly aware of how very naked she was, sitting on Heath’s lap.

“I think you do know,” he pressed gently. “Tell me why you got into trouble.”

She could feel his eyes on her, but she could not meet his gaze. “I guess… I felt restless. I like my job here at the ranch, but sometimes I get bored. I didn’t feel like I could tell you I was bored because I felt selfish, wanting more when you’ve given me so much.”

Lifting her chin so she had to meet his eyes, he gave her a stern look. “That’s not selfish, that’s awareness of your own needs. In the future, tell me what you need because I’m not good at guessing. Maybe if you take more trips to town, you won’t all of a sudden go so wild when you get some time away.”

“Yes, that makes sense,” she agreed. It did, but it didn’t solve her most aching problem. Her boredom and restlessness largely had to do with her desire for Heath to treat her differently. He had been kind and polite, but that wasn’t enough for her anymore.

He searched her eyes, seeming to know she wasn’t saying everything on her mind. “We need to talk about this more,” he said, “but first you need a good meal and a good night’s sleep.”

She didn’t want to leave the comfort of his lap, but she stood to her feet. He located her trousers and handed them to her. Air hissed through her teeth as she pulled the material over her tender bottom, but she did so quickly to regain modesty. She wondered what Heath thought about seeing her so naked and vulnerable, and she found herself thinking about what he looked like without his trousers. The thought of seeing his manhood caused her to blush furiously, and she

was grateful for the shadows of the barn.

They walked to the cabin together. Heath escorted her to her room and left, closing the door behind him after saying he would return shortly with some food.

Willow removed her clothes and observed her spanked bottom in the mirror. It was a bright cherry red. When she ran her hand over the punished flesh, a pleasurable burn ignited. She had an uncontrollable urge to dip her fingers between her legs. She did so with some trepidation, feeling very naughty but also nearly frantic to sooth the ache pulsing between her legs. She slid her fingers in her slit, and the juices of her sex coated her hand. Locating her little nub and swirling her fingers around it, she gasped with the sensations that came to life.

She couldn't take it another minute. She had to pleasure herself further. Rushing to open her dresser drawer, she donned her clean nightgown and crawled under the quilt. It would surely take Heath at least ten minutes to whip something up for her to eat, and that was more than enough time. She vibrated her fingers against her clit, rubbing the slick bud with urgency, hearing as she did the slickness of her fingers slapping against the sensitized flesh.

She heard Heath's voice in her head, scolding her for being a bad little girl, and she imagined his hand striking her bottom over and over again. What had been so painful moments before was now fueling her desire. His rough, calloused hands, kneading her flesh between swats, slapping her bare bottom firmly. She imagined her legs opening while he pinned her over his lap, and she imagined that he stopped spanking for a moment to rub beneath them.

It was Heath's hand, not hers, that was bringing her such pleasure. She moaned, losing all concept of the passing of time, forgetting that the door was unlocked, focused only on her final relief and satisfaction. Her toes curled, her back arched. She rolled to the side as the orgasm exploded through her body. Biting the quilt, she stifled her cry.

As the pleasure receded, her awareness returned. She looked at the door and saw Heath standing there holding a plate, a shocked expression on his face.

"Oh my God!" she cried, mortified beyond anything she'd felt before. "How long have you been there?"

He cleared his throat and coughed. "Long enough."

She scrambled out of bed, avoiding his eyes, and hurried to the basin. She washed her hands and her face like she did every evening, trying to figure out how she could recover from something so embarrassing. She'd thought being spanked bare-bottomed over Heath's knee was the most humiliating think she could endure. Turned

out, being caught pleasuring herself after said spanking trumped even that.

She returned to the bed and sat on the edge. She could not bring herself to look at him.

Heath handed her a plate of eggs, berries, and bread. “It’s the best I could do in a hurry, but… Well, perhaps I should have taken more time, huh?” His voice sounded hoarse, but there was a teasing note in it.

She took the plate from him. *My god, what must he think of me?* she thought to herself. She blinked away tears, determined to regain some semblance of composure. She had cried far too much that day, so she focused on eating, grateful for the distraction.

Silently, Heath observed Willow. Watching her pleasure herself had caused heat to roar to life inside of him. His cock strained painfully against his trousers, and it required a great deal of strength not to strip her out of her nightgown and bury his manhood deep inside of her. He wanted to fuck her, hard, just like she seemed to want.

He wouldn’t have guessed punishment would cause her to summon erotic feelings. Up until that point, he hadn’t even known whether she thought about sex or pleasure. Was it possible that she had the same feelings for him that he had for her?

Of course, he thought, the truth finally becoming clear to him. It wasn’t only possible, it was likely. She had fully submitted to his punishment, had seemed quite distraught over having disappointed him, and had practically begged him to show that he cared about her.

He cleared his throat. “Willow, I didn’t know you would, uh… respond, to punishment that way.”

Her blush seemed to deepen, and she didn’t say anything. He walked to the desk chair, pulled it out, and sat down. “Not that there was anything wrong with you becoming aroused to the point of needing relief. It’s natural.” *I would know*, he thought to himself, feeling painfully aroused himself at that point.

She nodded and continued to eat her food, bringing her hand to her mouth slowly and chewing as though in a daze. When she spoke, she said, “The spanking hurt, but I like that during that time I felt like you… cared about me? I felt overpowered and small.”

He smiled, relieved that she wasn’t trying to deny what had happened and was working to make sense of it. “I do care about you, and you’re not alone in your feelings. I didn’t enjoy punishing you, but I liked feeling like I was teaching you a lesson you needed to learn.

Ever since you arrived, I have had to stop myself from ordering you around and teaching you in a very personal way. But it seems that the entire time, that's exactly what you wanted and needed from me. Does that sound right?"

"I don't want to be ordered around, Heath," she said, a small frown forming. "I've always taken care of myself, and I like my independence."

"Maybe you do, but your body responded to being helpless and punished. You want me to have authority and to take charge. Perhaps you even misbehaved to see if you could push our friendship in a new direction. You said you were bored. Maybe you were more frustrated than bored?"

Her eyes widened slightly, as though the truth had dawned on her. "Maybe," she admitted softly. "I… I wanted more than politeness from you."

He nodded, finally understanding the entirety of the reason behind her disobedience. He wanted to sweep her into his arms and kiss her, proving exactly how he felt about her, but he figured she'd had quite enough excitement for one day. It would be better for her to sleep on it, and for him to do the same.

"Are you finished with your snack?" he asked.

"Yes… sir," she added, batting her eyelashes at him in a way that was adorable and without guile.

He smiled. "Alright, sweetheart. I want you to hand me that plate and thank me for your food. Then I want you to thank me for your spanking."

Heath watched as she swallowed and her cheeks became even pinker. Slowly, she handed him her plate. "Thanks for the food. I will *not* thank you for spanking me. It hurt terribly."

"You *will* thank me," he said, without changing his tone. "I know it's difficult, but I also know you want to be a good girl and do as I say."

She stared at him, her eyes moving back and forth between his. She sighed. "I wouldn't say it to anyone but you. Thank you for spanking me."

He stooped to kiss her on the forehead. "I know you wouldn't, just like I wouldn't demand it of anyone else. Now, straight to bed, Trouble. We'll talk tomorrow."

Chapter Twelve

Willow woke up before dawn and tiptoed to the kitchen. Under the dim glow of a coal-oil lamp, she heated water over the stove. She transferred it by the bucketful to the small washroom, pouring herself a bath. After scrubbing her hair and body clean, she soaked in the water and thought about the events that had transpired the previous day.

She didn't feel angry about Heath taking it upon himself to punish her, and her embarrassment over being seen pleasuring herself was already receding. It troubled her that she didn't feel angry. She felt smitten, like one of those women in town who would swoon all over Heath.

She stepped out of the bath onto the rug and reached for the towel draped over the full-length mirror. As she dried herself, she observed her nude figure, as if for the first time. She saw herself as Heath would see her. She looked full and ripe, the picture of youth and beauty she had never before acknowledged in herself. As she toweled her breasts, her nipples hardened as much from the thought of Heath as from the coolness in the air.

Her trim waist served to accentuate her flaring hips, which supported long slender legs. Her skin was naturally tan, her face smooth and blemish-free. She turned and observed her healthy backside in the mirror. Despite the pain of the spanking, not a mark could be seen on either cheek. Her bottom was the same healthy tan color as the rest of her, though slightly lighter in tone due to never having seen the sun.

She moved the towel to between her legs and rubbed to dry the thatch of hair. She let out a gasp as the material scraped over her clit lightly, bringing to memory the events of the evening before.

After she'd brushed and braided her hair, she looked at the neatly folded stack of her clean clothes sitting on the stool next to the bath. For the first time, she felt reluctant to don the boyish apparel. She wanted to wear something pretty. She wanted to prolong the feeling of femininity she'd experienced throughout the bath and during her time in front of the mirror.

As soon as she pulled on her clothes, the feeling disappeared, replaced by her usual attitude of vague defensiveness. The trousers were her armor. They protected her from feeling like a woman and therefore less than a man. From the time she was very young, it had been clear to her that men commanded more respect, simply because they were men. As much as she hated that idea, she'd bought into it by disguising her womanhood as much as possible.

But perhaps she was missing out on something. Feeling how she

had while wrapped in Heath's arms after the spanking had been wonderful. She'd felt small, safe, and very much a vulnerable woman.

She became aware of voices on the other side of the door and realized the family was awake and would be wanting breakfast soon. The thought of facing Heath again brought a flush to her face.

"Willow?" Heath called out as he knocked.

"Almost done," she said. "Just have to empty the bath. There's milk in the cellar and fresh bread if you want to get started on breakfast."

"We'll be fine. I can even figure out how to make coffee. Take your time."

Willow hauled the water outside by the bucketful and dumped it in the garden before she walked into the kitchen.

"Miss Willow!" Bitty exclaimed upon seeing her.

"I put some bread and butter on your plate," Jack said. "I can pour you some coffee if you want."

Willow studiously avoided Heath's eyes and smiled at the children, happy to see them. "Why are you two being so nice to me, huh? What do you want?"

Jack shrugged. "You weren't here for a long time, and it was no fun."

"Yeah," Bitty confirmed. "Pa was in an awfully bad mood, and we just had boiled potatoes and grits."

"Why did you leave?" Jack asked. "Are you going to leave us for two whole days again?"

Willow sat on the stool between the children and concentrated very hard on breaking off a piece of bread to eat. She could feel everyone's eyes on her as they waited for an explanation. "I don't plan on leaving y'all for that long again," she said quietly.

"We'll be good," Bitty told her. "Then you won't want to."

"No, it's not that, Bitty. You did nothing wrong. It's just… I had a very different life before coming here. Sometimes I miss it, but it has nothing to do with you."

She looked across the table at Heath, his gaze on her too strong to ignore. He was observing her with a sober, intense look.

After breakfast, the children scattered, leaving her alone with Heath.

"Leave the dishes a minute," he said. "I'd like to talk with you before I go to work. How are you feeling this morning?"

"I'm fine. You didn't beat me black and blue."

"I know that! I'm asking more about your state of mind."

It was uncomfortable to be scrutinized. She found herself wanting to retreat because her feelings were too raw. How could she explain that for the first time, she felt like a woman who desired a

man? “My state of mind is fine too. Don’t worry, I’m not going to fawn all over you, if that’s what’s concerning you.”

“Willow.” His voice was low with warning, causing a flutter in her stomach, but she clenched her jaw and straightened, determined not to lose her composure like she had the evening before.

“Don’t put your walls up,” he said. “Talk to me.”

Anger surged through her. It seemed unfair that he should be insisting on her sharing her feelings, when he didn’t seem keen on doing the same. Though he might be fond of her, she was still his hired help and he was her boss, not her beau. She didn’t owe him anything except adherence to his rules.

“Why do you want me to talk? Haven’t we talked enough?” she asked, her voice conveying anger.

His brows lifted. “I want to make sure you’re alright.”

“And I said I’m fine. What else do you want me to say?”

He leaned back against the counter. “I want you to acknowledge that something has happened between us, I guess.”

“Fine. Something happened. You spanked me to tears because I disobeyed you and put myself in danger. It won’t happen again.”

“That wasn’t all that happened yesterday, and you know it.”

He was obviously referring to how she’d pleasured herself after getting spanked, but she couldn’t think of what to say about it, nor did she want to. She knew what she felt for him was romantic. She also knew that Heath had no intention of remarrying. She stared at the red-checkered pattern of the tablecloth, willing him to leave her alone.

Instead, he reached out and took her hand in his. The touch sent shudders of pleasure up her arm, and she could barely stifle a gasp.

“Willow, I feel…” He hesitated, squeezed her hand. “I feel great affection for you. I know attention from a man is new to you, and I don’t want to force you into something you’re uncomfortable with. But I would be honored if you’d permit me to show how much I care about you... In nicer ways than spanking, that is.”

Willow’s defenses faltered, and her anger evaporated. He wasn’t insisting she speak of her feelings without doing the same. He was forging ahead, saying how he felt, and she once again realized how much she admired him. He continually proved to be a brave man, in ways surprising to her.

She stared at his hand swallowing hers. Heath was rubbing his calloused thumb in circles around her wrist, coaxing her into that state of softness and vulnerability she’d felt the prior evening.

“How will you show me affection?” she asked, her voice barely louder than a whisper.

“A man has his ways. But the lady must welcome it first. My question is, would you welcome it from me?”

Willow’s mind raced to catch up after hearing him call her a lady. It sounded very much like Heath wanted to court her! It amazed her, not only because she didn’t consider herself marriageable, but also because Heath had told her that first day that he didn’t want to marry again.

Heath gently squeezed her hand again. “Yes or no, darlin’. That’s all you have to say. I’ll take it from there.”

“Yes,” she whispered. Then, loudly, with a boldness she didn’t feel, she said, “Yes, I want you to show me affection,” and stared straight into his eyes.

His gaze softened and he smiled. He brought her hand to his lips and kissed it. “Brave girl, aren’t you?”

She smiled back at him, glad that she’d been able to match him in courage.

Chapter Thirteen

Heath worked that day with an extra bounce to his step. Knowing Willow returned his feelings gave him great energy and focus. It had been a long time since he'd spent a day of work fueled by his passion for a woman and excitement over where it would lead.

It was clear to him that she was nervous about entering into a courtship with him. He would have to go slowly and carefully. For all her bravado, she was as innocent as a lamb in the ways of love.

When he arrived home at the end of the workday, Bitty was sitting on a stool in the middle of the room, a wide smile on her face, and Willow was standing behind her, affixing green and blue ribbons to the little girl's hair.

It was a touching sight. For years, Heath had lamented that Bitty's mother wasn't around to do those kinds of girlish things with her.

"Hi, Pa!" Bitty said.

"Howdy, Bit. What'cha gettin' all prettied up for?"

"Miss Willow wanted to do my hair," she said, bouncing and making it difficult for Willow to tie the final ribbon. But Willow responded in her usual patient way, simply waiting for Bitty to stop moving before returning to her task.

"Is that right?" He looked at Willow while asking the question. She gave him a shy smile.

It seemed a strange thing for Willow to want to do, given her manner of dressing herself, and it made him realize she might *not* be offended if he gifted her a frock, which he'd wanted to do for some time. Maybe she wasn't as hell-bent on wearing masculine clothes as she'd let on in the beginning.

Giving her a dress would be one of those actions which would hover dangerously close to being over the line. He wanted to ease her into discovering that she was a beautiful woman who didn't need to pretend otherwise around him, but he didn't want to control her.

Another thought gave him pause. To purchase a dress, he would have to visit Victoria Davis, the gossiping seamstress who thought he was sweet on her, and he worried that doing so would cause her no small amount of speculation about his relationship with Willow.

He dismissed that concern quickly. It wasn't in his nature to care about gossip. And though it would be unpleasant having to buy a dress from Victoria's shop, he hoped that the pleasure of helping Willow feel beautiful would far outweigh the discomfort.

His mind made up, the next day he took a trip to town. He made a quick stop at the mercantile to buy peppermint sticks for the

children. Then he gathered his patience and strode into the bright room of the seamstress's shop on Main Street.

Victoria looked up from her task of sewing an apron. "Well, well," she said, standing to her feet. Her lips formed into a sly smile. "If it isn't the hardworking Mr. Wolfe, taking some time away from the pasture."

"Good morning, Miss Davis." He looked around the shop, suddenly struck with how bad an idea it was to visit when there were no other customers. Victoria could easily interpret his unusual visit as being a sign of his interest. It was imperative that he prevent such an idea from forming, if it hadn't already. "I'm here to buy Willow a nice dress. Might you help me pick one out?"

The smile remained plastered on Victoria's face, but it drained from her eyes. The cold depths peered at him. "I'd be happy to," she said, in a voice that conveyed she was anything but. "Maybe a brown frock, so it doesn't appear dirty when she sweeps the floor?"

Heath allowed the comment to slide off him. "I was thinking green." He looked around and spotted a ribbon that was the color in his mind. He touched it to show her. "That color would look good on her."

"Of course," Victoria responded stiffly. "I think I have something that color in the back. One moment." She pivoted in a dramatic fashion that caused her full red skirt to balloon with air.

Heath was itching to leave, feeling out of place and uncomfortable about how Victoria had responded to his request. With any luck, he would be out of there soon, he assured himself.

The seamstress returned with a green dress and held it out for him. It was made with a shiny satin material and had black lace around the neckline and wrists. He didn't know much about women's fashion, but he thought Willow would look good in it.

"That's pretty," Heath said. "I'll buy it."

"Really?" Victoria asked, looking surprised.

"Yes… Why, is something wrong with it?"

"Not at all. It's just a little fancier than I thought you wanted. I had planned only to show you the color and cut, and then find some gingham to perhaps pattern into something more practical for day-to-day wear."

"Oh," Heath said, feeling confused. He didn't know if Willow would prefer a different fabric, and he didn't trust Victoria to tell him straight.

"There's also the size issue," Victoria continued. "From what I can recall, she's a little on the scrawny side, isn't she?" Her voice was as silky as the dress.

"She's slender," Heath said. "Is that dress too big for her?"

“It might be. How about you have her come here and I’ll fit it to her?”

Heath didn’t like that idea. It would be like throwing a kitten to a wolf. “No, I’ll go ahead and buy it,” he said, with firmness in his tone. “She can bring it back in if she needs it fitted.”

“Sure, if that’s the way you want it. I’ll just wrap it up for you then.”

Heath waited in awkward silence as Victoria folded the dress and wrapped brown paper around it. She tied it off with a length of twine. After he paid, he said his thanks quickly and left, exhaling as soon as he left the shop. The event had been even more uncomfortable than he’d predicted, and he had an irrational suspicion that he’d put something terrible into motion that he was helpless to prevent.

Chapter Fourteen

After supper, Willow excused herself to her room, where she curled up on her bed and mused about how Heath would show his affection to her. She thought about what it would feel like for him to kiss her. She licked her lips, imagining his mouth against hers as he wrapped his arms around her in a tight embrace.

A rap on the door interrupted her thoughts. “Willow, may I come in?” Heath asked.

Willow sat up straight on the bed. She was already wearing her nightgown. It occurred to her that it was improper dress to wear in front of the man courting her, but considering that Heath had already seen her bare from the waist down, it seemed silly to care.

“Yes, come in,” she answered, as she ran a hand over her hair to make sure it wasn’t sticking up in the back from a cowlick she’d had her whole life.

Heath walked in, a brown paper package under his arm, and closed the door behind him.

“What’s that?” she asked.

“You remember how I said I wanted to show my affection to you?”

She smiled. “Yes, how could I forget?”

“One way is by buying you gifts.” He handed it to her and then took a seat next to her on the bed.

His weight caused her to lean against his body. She shifted her seat to be positioned just a hair’s width apart from him, but she could feel the warmth emanating from him.

She guessed from the package’s size and weight that the gift was material of some sort. Carefully, she untied the bow of twine and pulled it apart. The brown paper crackled loudly in the silence of the room.

It was a dress—quite a fancy one from the looks of it. She ran her hand carefully over the rich green satin and fingered the lace that trimmed the dress. “It’s beautiful.”

Heath seemed to breathe a sigh of relief. “I’m glad you think so. If it’s too big, the seamstress said she could take it in for you.”

“I’m not used to wearing dresses.”

“I know, and I was told that this dress is not for everyday use, only special occasions.”

Willow didn’t know when she would be able to make use of the dress, but she didn’t want to appear ungrateful. “Thank you, Heath. It’s very nice.”

As though reading her mind, he said, “I want to propose when you might wear it. I thought I would take you for a buggy ride and

picnic this coming Sunday, if the weather allows."

Willow liked the idea of spending hours alone with Heath. Even a few minutes in his presence caused her belly to flip with excitement. "Alright," she said, staring down at the dress. Shyly, she added, "You weren't kidding about showing me affection."

"No, of course not." He reached over and touched the side of her chin with one finger, turning her to look at him. Like when he'd held her hand, the touch sent excitement skittering throughout her body.

"If the dress doesn't feel comfortable, you can wear trousers," he said. "I'm not going to dictate what you wear. I think you're pretty no matter what."

His words warmed her from head to toe. "Thank you, Heath."

He lowered his hand to rest on her knee. "I got the idea you wouldn't mind such a gift when I saw you gussying up Bitty."

"I don't mind at all. It's just that I've never liked wearing dresses because I don't see the point. They're not as comfortable as trousers, and I'm not a looker. The way I see it, an ugly girl might as well wear ugly clothes."

His eyes narrowed and seemed to bore into hers. "Careful," he said softly, squeezing her knee. "Saying things like that will get you spanked again."

Surprised, she looked away, but he cupped her chin and turned her face to look at him again. "I mean it, darlin'," he said.

She blinked. "I know, but I don't understand. I'm not trying to say the wrong thing." Her heartbeat picked up, both from the threat of punishment and from Heath's continued touch.

"You truly don't understand?"

She tried to shake her head. He released her chin and sighed in an exasperated way. Standing, he took her hand and drew her to the full-length looking-glass next to the door. The mirror had belonged to Rose, and shortly after Willow had moved in, Heath had moved it from his bedroom to Willow's, saying he figured she would have more use for it than he would. But Willow had barely glanced at it before that moment.

"Look at yourself," he instructed. "You're beautiful, from your shining black hair, to your little button nose and kissable lips, down to your soft curves, and the neat, trim lines of your legs. Try to see yourself as I see you."

She obeyed, studying her reflection. She didn't mention that she'd already done this while naked after her bath. Like before, she was able to see herself through Heath's eyes, and the truth was clear to her. She looked nothing like her stunning mother, but she was attractive in a way that was uniquely her. She felt Heath's gaze on her

body, and it caused something to bloom inside of her. Her feelings were new—a sort of awakening. It was a feeling of being noticed, without any fear of judgment attached.

"Do you see how beautiful you are?" he asked.

She nodded. "I think I do. Yes." She looked at him through the reflection of the mirror and smiled.

He nodded but didn't return the smile. He sat on the bed. "I'm glad. Now come bend over my knee for your punishment, lickety-split."

She turned to face him, shocked. "I don't deserve a spanking!"

"You do, for calling yourself ugly."

"Heath, that hardly seems reasonable. How is it that I lived here for two months without any spankings, and now I'm to receive two in a row?"

He patted his right leg. "I'll explain, but first you will obey."

She groaned, convinced he was being unfair, but she took her place over his lap.

"Good girl," he said, with a short chuckle. "That wasn't easy for you, but you want to obey me, don't you?"

"I guess," she mumbled. She propped up on her elbows on the bed and rested her chin in her hands. Her legs dangled in the air.

"When you first joined us, my expectations for you were low. My main concern was to make sure you settled in well, behaved yourself, and learned to live an honest lifestyle."

"I did all that," Willow pointed out.

"You sure, did, honey. I'm very proud of you. You exceeded all of my original expectations, and you even became my friend, someone I respect."

He proceeded to perform the embarrassing task of lifting her nightgown and revealing her bare bottom, causing her to drop her face against the quilt. Her voice muffled, she said, "But you wouldn't have spanked me for calling myself ugly before."

"No, I wouldn't have. That's what I'm trying to explain. I'm only going to spank you because my expectations for you have gotten higher, and I think you like it that way."

He laid his large hand over her bottom. She felt such a jolt of arousal she let out a quiet mewl. "Please," she begged. "I feel so much." She didn't know how to express to him the confusion of feelings—arousal and embarrassment. She wanted him to spank her, and she wanted him not to spank her just as much.

"I know." His voice was kind. "This will not be a harsh punishment. Only a little discipline to remind you never to call yourself ugly again." He brought his hand down in a *splat* across both cheeks. It was not a gentle swat, but it wasn't hard enough to cause

anything but a sting. The next stroke caught the lowest part of her left cheek, and an identical stroke on her right quickly followed.

"Are you ever going to put yourself down again, Willow?" he asked sternly.

"No, sir," she responded. Like before when she'd been over his lap, she felt completely submissive and eager to please him.

"Three more swats to make sure of that," he said.

The spanks were delivered sharply one after the other and built up sufficient burning on her posterior to elicit a yelp at the end, but the discipline was much, much more lenient compared to the first spanking.

He rubbed her bottom. "Wasn't so bad, was it?"

"Mmmn, no, and that feels nice."

"Your bottom is perfect. Soft skin. Plump little cheeks." He gave one cheek a gratuitous squeeze before continuing to rub.

"You liked spanking me just now, didn't you?" she asked, without any accusation in her tone.

He stopped rubbing. "I liked it about as much as you did."

"I didn't at all. You spank hard, and it hurts."

"Hmm," he responded. "I'm going to ask you to do something, and you can say no if you want. Alright?"

She didn't know what he could possibly want her to do while in her current position, but she nodded. In that moment, she would have done anything he asked. The feeling of his hand on her bottom in such a proprietary, loving fashion caused her to feel especially obedient.

"Spread your legs and allow me to touch between them."

Her breath caught. Never in her wildest dreams would she have guessed he would ask that. "What? Why?" she asked hoarsely.

"Because I want to prove something, and I also want to give you pleasure." He smoothed his hand over her bottom down to her thigh, resting it there.

She looked at him over her shoulder and met his gaze. His expression was intense, but there was kindness in his eyes. "Remember, you can say no."

"I'll do it."

"Brave girl," he said. He smiled, and there was a glint of wickedness in his smile that made him appear just the slightest bit dangerous. "Go ahead then."

Her heart picked up speed, but she was resolved to do as he asked. She buried her head in the quilt and shifted. She moved her thighs apart slightly, barely an inch. She lacked the courage to move them more, but Heath took over. He guided her leg toward him, then gently pushed her other leg away so that it dropped down over his knee and her toes touched the floor. She felt obscenely exposed with

her legs sprawled so far apart, and the fanning of cool air that brushed her sex accentuated her exposure.

She held her breath as the tips of his calloused fingers scraped over the sensitive skin of her inner thigh, from her inner knee upward, touching her with such exquisite slowness she felt as though she might burst before his fingers reached their destination.

When his fingers finally dipped into her slit, she convulsed and grasped the quilt with both hands. Heath took in a sharp breath. “It’s as I expected,” he said, his voice a rumbling growl. He slid a finger further, touching the little bundle of nerves and swirling his finger around it languidly.

Willow arched her back and gasped. The touch was more than she could stand, but she also didn’t want him to stop. “What’s as you expected?” she whimpered.

His finger stopped swirling, and he removed his hand briefly, before landing two heavy pats to her mound. He grasped the entirety of her pussy possessively. “You’re wet for me. You enjoyed that spanking as much as I did, and you’re aching for me to enter you, aren’t you, Willow?”

“I-I don’t know,” she said. But she did know. She wanted to feel him inside of her.

“Don’t lie,” he said mildly, giving her mound another spank. This time the swat landed painfully over her little nub, but the pain was quickly followed by pleasure as he resumed stroking around her sensitized sex.

Her toes curled. She moaned and shifted, trying to feel more of his touch, willing him to do something more, something rougher than the gentle tease of her flesh with his fingers.

“Tell me how you feel, Willow,” he said.

“I feel like… I want you. Please keep… touching me.”

He responded with a groan and slipped a finger inside of her. He felt along her channel as she clenched onto his finger in desperation. “Oh, please,” she gasped.

“That’s right, girl, beg for it,” he said, and slipped another finger inside of her.

Delicious humiliation washed over her as he pumped two fingers in and out of her, causing her to writhe and clench every muscle of her body.

She was reveling in the sensations, eyes closed, mewling as he took her toward the same pleasure she’d received after her first punishment.

Then without warning, he removed his hand from between her legs and spanked her bottom, over and over. “Tell me again that you didn’t like getting spanked, little liar,” he said.

His hand blazed fire across her seat, causing her entire body to tense up. She gasped and clawed the quilt, desperate to escape his punishing hand, but his forearm against her back kept her tightly in place.

He halted the spanking, which brought some relief, but the reprieve was only to pull her body closer to him. He repositioned her legs so that each naked thigh draped on either side of his left knee. He resumed spanking, hard, causing her mound to crash against the muscles of his thigh in rhythm. The pain mounted along with the pleasure, and she couldn't make sense of her desire to escape the pain and simultaneously squeeze from it the pleasure that seemed just out of reach.

Mercifully, he ceased spanking and moved his hot hand to between her legs once again. His fingers were as gentle on her velvet flesh as his palm had been hard on her bottom. She moaned and surrendered to his ministrations. Again, he entered her with two fingers. For a time, all that could be heard was the slick sounds of him sliding in and out of her along with her gasps as her arousal climbed.

All at once an orgasm burst through her like dynamite, and she cried out.

Heath continued to pump his fingers in her pussy, but he wrapped his other hand over her mouth. His harsh whisper tickled her ear. "Hush! All of Thorndale doesn't need to know I'm fingering your wet little cunt."

She choked back her cry of pleasure, stunned by his crude language, which only managed to heighten her excitement and make it more difficult to stifle her moans. She mewled against his hand, breathing hard as her orgasm receded. Still holding a hand over her mouth, Heath removed his fingers from where they were buried inside of her and stroked his hand lightly over her bottom, covering her in her own juices.

Once she had ridden the last delicious wave of pleasure, she found herself unable to speak with his hand still covering her mouth. She nipped his finger, not too hard, but enough to cause his hand to jerk away from her mouth in surprise.

"Hey!" he said. "Don't tell me you already want another spanking."

She giggled and rolled over in his lap. She lifted herself into a seated position and wrapped her arms around his neck. "No. But you were right, I liked that spanking." Underneath her, she felt the hard length of him, pressing against the split of her cheeks. She flushed as understanding dawned on her that his cock was hard for her.

He grinned. "I quite enjoyed it myself."

She wriggled her bottom over his cock. "Really?"

“Don’t do that!”

“Do what?” she asked, widening her eyes in an innocent expression. She squirmed again, eager to goad him into freeing his cock from his trousers and burying it into her.

He closed his eyes, and his muscles flexed along his jawline. When he opened his eyes, he glared at her. “You don’t know what you’re asking for, darlin’.”

“I do,” she insisted, glaring right back. “I want you… inside of me.”

He groaned and dropped his head back, staring up at the ceiling as though to implore the heavens for help with the trouble in his lap.

When he looked at her again, resolve had replaced the devilish look that had been in his eyes. He wrapped his hands around her waist. He lifted her off his lap and plopped her on the bed as though she were no heavier than a feather. Standing and taking a step away, he said, “I will make love to you, Willow, but not today.”

“But why not today?”

Instead of answering her question, he asked, “Who’s in charge here, me or you?”

She declined to answer, and instead spread the skirt of her nightgown over her bare knees.

Heath reached out and took hold of a tress of her hair. Gently he pulled his fingers through it, creating a tingle in her scalp. Gathering her hair at the nape, he enclosed it around his fist and tugged lightly, lifting her head up. She found herself staring into his eyes. “Well, darlin’? I asked you a question.”

“You’re in charge,” she said in a whisper, as a cozy warmth enveloped her.

“That’s right, and you prefer it that way, don’t you?”

She thought about what it would be like if Heath were like any of her hooligan friends on the street, with whom she’d been in a constant battle to establish dominance as a result of her female disadvantage. None of those men had made her heart flutter like Heath did. None had managed to make her feel safe and cared for. Though she didn’t understand the longings of her heart, she knew the truth.

“Yes, Heath. I do prefer for you to be in charge. I trust you.”

He smiled at her. “Good girl. Now get some sleep.”

Chapter Fifteen

The horse ambled along down the dirt path on a cool Sunday morning, pulling the buggy with Willow and Heath. Cumulous clouds moving slowly east with the breeze shadowed the sun in brief intervals.

"I haven't been to this spot in some time," Heath said. "I hope it's as pretty as I remember."

Willow smoothed her hands down the front of her new dress. It was her very first time being properly courted, and she wasn't sure how to behave. But somehow, by wearing the dress, she felt more like a lady. She naturally sat up straight with her knees locked.

"It won't be as pretty as you, though," Heath said, casting a smile her way. "You're looking comely in your new dress."

"Thank you, Heath. You look handsome yourself, wearing your best bib and tucker."

He'd donned new-fangled denim trousers and a black button-up shirt. It fit so well that with every movement to guide the horse, the ripple of his arm muscles would bulge conspicuously. He'd shaved his face and shined his boots.

Willow thought it strange that Heath had turned his sights to her, when every unattached woman in Thorndale would have gladly spent this Sunday in Willow's shoes. She wanted to ask him why he was attracted to her, but she worried that if she did so, he might come to his senses and change his mind about courting her.

It grew darker when they entered a dense thicket of live oaks. Long, full-leafed branches arched over the pathway, giving the effect of entering a tunnel.

"Not too much farther now," Heath said. The horse slowed as the path ahead grew darker, and Heath slapped her rump with a rein to move her along.

After a short time under the darkness of the thicket, the number of trees thinned. A few strides later there were no trees at all, and the horse pulled the buggy into a bright clearing.

"Lordy," Willow said, awed as she looked around. What struck her first were the monarch butterflies, flapping their wings in a tilted dance over the buttercups and primroses. Grass around the wildflowers rolled like waves with the breeze.

Heath pulled the horse to a stop. There was near-total silence, broken only by the tweeting of sparrows in the trees behind them.

"Good spot for a picnic?" Heath asked, hopping down from the buggy.

"I'll say." She allowed him to take her hand and assist with her descent. "What a peaceful place this is."

When she reached the ground, he didn't release her. Instead, he took her other hand and smiled down at her. She couldn't help but smile back. "I'm glad you're pleased with it," he said. "I want very much to make you happy, Willow."

"Why is that, Heath?"

He looked surprised by the question. "I don't know. I swear from the first day you came to live with me and the children, I've wanted to impress you. You're not at all what I expected."

"You thought you were bringing trouble home, based on the talk around town, and you were surprised that I have some good qualities."

He smiled his response and released her hands. As he spread the material that was to act as a tablecloth over the grass, Willow took down the basket she'd used to pack their midday meal.

Later, after they had finished their sandwiches and were munching on grapes, he said, "There was plenty of talk around town about your troublesome behavior. I didn't give that much mind, but I did listen to the marshal. Clyde told me you used to steal from the mercantile and run around drunk at night. I thought you would try some of the same shenanigans at the ranch and I'd have to tan your hide a few times. But when you arrived, you put all your effort toward doing your best. That astonished me, I must admit."

"I suppose I surprised myself too. But I knew from the moment I arrived that I wanted to do everything I could to keep the job. I've never had my own room or slept in such a comfortable bed. Plus, I liked the children right away."

Heath reclined on the blanket, facing her. He propped up on an elbow. "They like you too, better than I could have hoped."

"You're not what I expected either, you know," she said. "You were kind to me when I ruined supper on the first day. I thought you would be a mean and humorless tyrant."

He chuckled. "You can credit yourself for some of that. I don't think I've ever been a tyrant, but I was fairly dull before you came to the ranch." He looked beyond her, staring at something in the distance. "You made me laugh for the first time in a long while."

Willow saw sorrow in his gaze. Compassion filling her, she reached out and touched his cheek. "You miss your wife. I'm sorry."

He took hold of her wrist and planted a light kiss on her palm. "Thank you, darlin', but you don't need to concern yourself with my grief. You have plenty of your own, don't you?"

"True enough," she agreed. "As the marshal's daughter Sadie said to me, we all got a sad story."

"That's why we never should take anyone special for granted." He sat up. "Come here," he said, tugging her toward him.

She scooted over, and he wrapped his arm around her, pulling her flush against his body. A filament of heat traveled up her spine, as she drank in his closeness. He smelled delicious, like soap and the sweet grapes they'd just eaten. She could almost feel his hot gaze on the profile of her face from the way the flesh of her neck and cheeks warmed.

When she turned to look at him, he tilted his head down and kissed her. Her belly quivered as her thoughts scattered into thin air. Though she had never before kissed a man and wasn't sure what she should do, she closed her eyes and allowed her lips to soften against his. He teased her mouth open, and she was thrilled at his love play with her tongue, swirling and tasting him as though it would be her last time.

When he released her lips, her mouth felt swollen. She stared into his smoldering eyes until he kissed her again, this time crushing his mouth against hers and burrowing his hand in her hair. Her body ached for his touch, so when he began to fiddle with the ties of her dress, she shivered with pleasure, knowing her skin would soon feel him. He gently pushed her to the soft ground so that she was on her back. When he inched the fabric of her dress down, he exposed her naked breasts.

"Nothing under your dress, sweetheart?" he asked rhetorically, in between kisses that seared a path down her neck to the mounds of her breasts. "That's very naughty, you know."

A comment about him not buying her a shift to go under the dress formed disjointed words in her mind that did not pass her lips. The thought was lost in a gasp as he swirled his tongue around her peaked nipple, causing an undercurrent of sexual awareness to rip through her. He pulled the dress down further, exposing her belly button and finally the inverted V at the apex of her legs. She shivered with pleasure as the path of his kisses traveled across her stomach.

He removed the dress, leaving her fully nude, and she expected him then to remove his clothes. Instead, he spread her legs apart and dipped his head between them. He sought her center with his tongue.

"Oh, Heath!" she cried, embarrassed to be tasted so intimately. He did not respond except to drag his tongue through her slit to the little nub that caused her such pleasure. She threaded her fingers through his hair, frantic with the sensations coursing through her body. The slow penetration of his tongue inside of her made her whimper and arch her back, lifting her bottom clear off the ground.

With a hand on each hip, he pulled her back down to earth. "Relax, Willow," he said. From between her legs, he looked up and caught her eye with a stern look that held great promise of naughty delight. She collapsed in defeat.

His fingers splayed across her flesh, keeping her fixed as he continued the ministrations he'd started. Languid tongue strokes with no perceivable pattern touched every inch of her soft lips and focused with some quickness at her little nub of pleasure. She tilted her head back and moaned, reveling in the sensations that made her feel helpless. Staring at a slowly moving cloud, she tried to relax even as her body tensed.

His appetite for her seemed ravenous, with no sign of ending. Even as his tongue was urging her to climax, his patience in getting her there came through. His labor of love was steadfast, unhurried.

She suddenly had to know what he was thinking. She grasped his hair in her fingers and tugged. "Heath!"

His tongue stopped swirling, and he looked up at her. "Yes, darlin'?" he asked, with a lightness in his tone.

"Do you… like doing this?"

"Very much so," he responded in a growl. "I like it even more when I'm not interrupted."

"Oh," she said, loosening her grip. "You may continue then." She rested her head on the ground again, looking up at the fluffy white cloud against the blue sky. She licked her lips, waiting for the wonderful sensations to resume.

He chuckled darkly, causing her heart to flutter. "Just for that, I'm going to fuck you hard with my cock when I'm through fucking you with my tongue."

She gasped, shocked for the second time by his crude language. When she was able to speak, she said, "Everyone thinks you're such a gentleman, Heath Wolfe."

"You know otherwise, don't you, Willow McAllister?" he responded, and kissed her pussy lips lightly.

"Oh, yes," she said, feeling like she would burst from joy or pleasure. "Heath?"

He took her clit between his lips and suckled. "Hmm?"

"Weren't you going to fuck me with your cock anyway?"

Releasing her clit, he said, "Smart girl, aren't you?" before returning his attention to the task at hand.

She grinned up at the cloud. How lucky she felt to know this man so intimately, and for him to know her as well. As her arousal grew, so did her love. When the orgasm burst inside of her, she was filled with such a powerful adoration for the man giving her such pleasure that she almost said how she felt out loud. Before she could say she loved him, however, Heath distracted her by rising to his feet.

From where she lie on her back, she watched as he unbuttoned his shirt and tore it off his shoulders. Seeing for the first time the masculine slopes of his bristled chest and the muscled plane of his

stomach left her without words. When he hooked his thumb in the waistband of his trousers and pushed them down, his cock sprang free. It was much larger than she'd thought possible. It looked hard and angry, pointing at her with such intent she swallowed nervously. It didn't seem likely that he would fit inside of her.

Heath didn't seem to have the same concern. Now as naked as she, he positioned himself with a knee on either side of her legs. He leaned over her and captured her lips with his. She kissed him back eagerly as the wisps of his chest hair scraped along her pebbled nipples. Reaching around, she clutched his back, feeling his shoulder blades under the warm skin.

His hands traveled along her torso, the phantom warmth of his touch remaining even as his hand moved to caress her thighs. He kissed along her jaw up to her ear. "Spread those beautiful legs for me, darlin'," he whispered.

A wave of primal heat surged through her at his words, which sounded equal parts dominating and affectionate. "I'm yours," she whispered back as she obeyed, and knew that she'd never spoken truer words. She was his, completely and forever. He had won her heart and her body, and nothing would give her greater pleasure than surrendering to him fully.

He guided his cock to the origin of her wetness and pressed against her. Though slow and gentle in entering her, he was also relentless. She hissed and clenched around his cock, which did not cause him to slow. If anything, it spurred him to delve deeper. Pain blinded her for a moment, but she did not cry out, determined to accept his claim over her body.

He let out a raw groan and with a final push seated himself fully inside of her. She could feel his erection pulsing against the walls of her channel as he paused a moment. The pain gone, she relished how their bodies fused together, and soon her need for him returned.

"You feel so good, baby," he said through clenched teeth. "You alright?"

"Yes, Heath," she said, staring up at him in total adoration. She loved the sight of him—his tousled hair and the way his roped muscles cascaded when he moved.

The wicked gleam was in his eyes again as he slid his cock back through her channel and thrust into her again with force.

She squeaked with surprise and watched, mesmerized, as his greedy gaze wandered to her breasts and back up to her eyes. Their lips locked as he thrust into her again, and she opened her mouth and legs wider, surrendering the intimate depths of herself to his tongue and cock.

As much as she had enjoyed orgasming as a result of Heath's

touch before, this joining of their bodies felt much more intense and meaningful. His desire for her had never been clearer as when he held on to her and sought his own pleasure with every hard thrust. She could tell that his body was as saturated with lust and desperate for relief as hers, and she wanted nothing more than to give him what he needed.

Her toes curled against his legs as his thrusts became even harder and faster, hurling her toward another orgasm. She found herself grinding her pelvis against his groin, urged forward by the sounds of their flesh smacking together.

He groaned when her participation increased. “You really are trouble,” he ground out, emphasizing his point with another thrust. “I know what to do with you.”

She moaned and arched up against him, desperate for him to continue. “What, Heath?”

“Give you a good fucking every day,” he said. “Would you like that, darlin’?”

“Yes!” she cried out.

“I would too.” He pinched one of her tender nipples, causing white-hot pleasure to overtake her.

She screamed and dug her nails into his back in a frenzy of desire. A sound emerged from deep and low in his throat as he slammed once more into her and then stiffened. Jets of his essence spurted into her, and she knew he had filled her with his seed, completing his raw act of possession.

Her body went limp as her orgasm faded, and Heath rolled to his back, pulling her along with him and enclosing her in his arms. Neither spoke as they breathed hard. Willow snuggled her head against his heaving chest and listened to the beat of his heart.

The scent of their lovemaking hung in the air. A butterfly landed on a wildflower next to them, and they studied it together in a comfortable daze.

Heath squeezed her tight. “You know I love you, don’t you, Willow?

“I do now,” she replied, pulling away enough to smile at him. “I love you too, Heath.”

He smiled back at her. “Do you think you can be happy with me on the ranch, or will you miss your old life?”

She sat up and retrieved her dress, feeling like she wanted to be clothed while having this conversation. Heath took her cue and dressed himself as well. When finished, he stretched his long, muscled legs out and leaned back on his hands.

She faced him, crossing her legs in front of her. “I love you and the children, and I’m happier now than I’ve ever been in my life.”

“But…”

She looked down and traced her fingers around the checkered design of the tablecloth. “But I suppose I know myself well enough to know that I’ll get restless being at home all the time. I get the itch to go a little wild… as you know.”

He nodded. “I understand that, darlin’. I really do. You’re like a half-tamed filly. I doubt I could tame you fully, even if I wanted to.”

“But don’t you want to? You punished me severely for drinking and carrying on.”

“No, I punished you for putting yourself in danger.”

“So then you wouldn’t mind if I went to town and drank whiskey and played cards, so long as I don’t put myself in danger?”

“That’s right. Look, Willow, living on the ranch was supposed to be an alternative to jail, not the same thing. I don’t want you to feel locked up, and I like that you’re not the same as every other woman. You’re different, and that’s why I love you.”

She smiled at him. Heath always managed to surprise her. He rose in her esteem in nearly every interaction they had.

“Of course, marriage is a bit like a ball and chain,” he said, his voice teasing, “but you can decide whether it’ll be worth it when I ask you to be my wife.”

Her heart leapt with joy to hear him say that marriage was in their future. He hadn’t said ‘if,’ he’d said ‘when’. Her mother had warned her that some men bed a woman without having serious intentions, but Willow was certain Heath was not one of them. Now that he’d mentioned marriage, she was doubly sure.

She reached out and touched his arm. “You’re so very good to me, Heath. I don’t know why you love me, but I’m glad you do.”

“Hush, now. I haven’t done anything easier than loving you.”

Chapter Sixteen

The bay mare pulled the buggy as Willow sat perched on the bouncing seat, passing the wooden Thorndale sign that appeared a half-mile before the first building on Main Street.

Once Ashton stopped in front of the livery, Willow climbed down, grasping the skirt of her green dress in one hand. She had convinced herself during the journey to town that it wouldn't be too difficult to swallow her pride and thank the marshal for arranging her job at the ranch, but now that the chore was in her immediate future, her courage waned.

She tied the mare loosely to the hitching post and looked across the street. She saw the marshal through the jailhouse's window, and her heart sank. She'd been hoping he wasn't around so that she could delay the chore.

Since that wasn't the case, she drew a deep breath and strode to the building, determined to get the task over with. She grasped the handle of the heavy door, pulled it open, and entered. The smell of the room—dust and metal—caused a queasiness in her stomach, as memories of the times she'd recovered from hangovers in the backroom cell flooded her mind.

Marshal Clyde Shaw looked up from the papers on his desk as she neared him. He set his pencil down and leaned back, his eyes widening. "I'll be danged," he said. "I didn't know Willow McAllister had a pretty twin sister. Where have you been hiding?"

"Howdy, Marshal," she said, smiling politely at his joke.

"What can I do for you? Everything going alright at the ranch?"

She looked over the top of his head, focusing on the Wanted posters behind him. "Yes, better than alright. That's why I came in to see you. I wanted to thank you for arranging my job with Heath. Having a home and something to do every day was just what I needed."

"No need to thank me," he said, breaking into a rare smile. "But that sure brightens my day. You planning to stay out of trouble from now on?"

"Yes, sir. I talked it over with Heath, and he thinks if I come to town once a week to do errands and have lunch at the restaurant, I'll be less likely to fall back into my own ways."

"That's a fine idea. It's important to have balance. Not too much work, not too much play."

She was nervous about what she was determined to say next. "You might think about giving your daughter Sadie some balance," she said quickly, before she could talk herself out of speaking her mind.

She held her breath. Not too many people dared to criticize the marshal, and she thought he might laugh her out of his office to hear a suggestion from her, considering how badly she'd behaved in the not-too-distant-past, but she felt strongly about the matter.

His gaze sobered, and he frowned. "What are you talking about?"

Willow scowled back at him. "When Sadie came over to help me learn to cook, she was plumb worn out from doing all the cooking and cleaning for six people. That's a lot of work for a twelve-year-old child."

Clyde stroked the closely cropped beard on his chin as Willow steeled herself for an angry response. From her experience, most men didn't react all that well to advice, especially from a woman.

"She's never complained about it to me," he said quietly. She detected no anger in his voice.

"Would complaining be in her nature?"

"No," he said, his voice still soft. "She doesn't complain. She's stoic and sensible, like her mother was."

Willow nodded. "I think she could use some help. That's all I wanted to say."

She turned toward the door. Though the task of visiting the marshal had gone better than expected, she still didn't like being inside the jailhouse. It brought up too many bad memories, and she was eager to leave.

Clyde stood and rounded his desk. "Thank you for stopping by, Willow. I'm pleased to hear how well your job with Heath has worked out." He walked her to the door. She reached out to shake his hand, and he enclosed it in a friendly grip.

Willow walked outside and breathed in the fresh air. As she meandered away from the jailhouse, she spotted the mercantile owner Charles Campbell holding a wriggling, cursing boy by his collar and dragging him toward the jailhouse.

"Let me go!" the boy shouted, and swung an angry fist. The fist didn't connect, and Charles continued to march him forward. That's when the boy sank his teeth into Mr. Campbell's arm, but that too failed to slow the progress made toward the marshal.

Willow shook her head and resumed walking down the wooden walkway, grateful she was no longer getting dragged to the marshal for some offense. She wondered what would happen to the boy. He didn't look familiar, so she guessed he was probably from out of town. It might be difficult for the marshal to track down his folks.

As she neared her next destination, the seamstress's shop, she marveled at how much her life had changed. She was about to purchase two new dresses, as well as the underclothes Heath hadn't

known to purchase when he'd bought her the first dress.

Before, she would have thought the errand vapid and useless, but now she thought about how nice she would look for Heath. She'd come to learn it wasn't vain to want admiration, and she would be delighted if she saw a twinkle in his eyes every day when he looked at her.

When Willow walked into the shop, Victoria Davis was arranging a selection of feathered hats by the window. The two of them had grown up together and had even been friends when they were very young, but now they had little in common besides being of the same age.

Victoria looked Willow up and down so quickly that her eyes barely flickered, but Willow didn't miss the contempt in the smile that followed. Most people thought they were better than Willow because of her poor means and improper manners.

Willow had given up caring about that long ago, so it surprised her to feel a sudden longing to be looked at with respect by another woman. Standing there under Victoria's practiced eye made her feel apprehensive, and she wished she'd chosen to wear her trousers instead. If she wasn't even *trying* to look pretty, she couldn't be hurt by people's derision.

"Hello, Victoria," Willow said. "Nice weather today, isn't it?"

"Indeed," she responded, flashing a smile. "And I must say that dress looks splendid on you. Mr. Wolfe chose well."

Willow breathed a sigh of relief at her friendly response, and she wondered if perhaps she'd been mistaken about the look of contempt. "Thank you. It was a generous gift, but I'm afraid Heath didn't think to buy any undergarments. That's why I'm here. Also, I want to buy two more dresses for everyday wear."

Victoria's eyes widened. "You call him Heath, do you? That seems very familiar."

"I thought so too at first, but he asked me to call him by his given name the very first day I started working for him. I suppose he wanted us to be friends."

"And are you… friends?" she asked, looking at her strangely.

"Yes," Willow answered, growing uncomfortable with the questions. She turned her attention to a neatly folded assortment of petticoats and reached out to touch the sturdy cotton material. "Do you think one of these would work under this dress?"

"Certainly," Victoria replied. "You could buy one petticoat for each dress or only one to go under them all. It depends on how much you can spend."

"Heath didn't give me a limit, but I don't want to take advantage."

“My, but isn’t he generous?” Victoria replied in a singsong voice. “How about you choose a couple everyday dresses, and then you can decide about the petticoats? I’ll go pick out some drawers for you, if you like.”

Willow nodded. “Yes, thank you.” She moved to the brightly colored gingham dresses and examined each one carefully, becoming so consumed with the task she almost forgot Victoria was in the store. She remembered a time long ago when her mother had taken her to this very place—back when Victoria’s mother had done all the sewing—to pick out a readymade dress.

As a child, she remembered being bored and unhappy, wishing she could return to her games outside and bemoaning that she was a girl who had to wear such constricting garments. Her mother gave up on trying to get Willow to be interested in girlish matters and eventually made her trousers like she requested.

Her eyes stung, thinking about her mother, who hadn’t forced Willow to be someone she wasn’t. Willow wished her mother were alive to see her now, wearing a dress and shopping to purchase more. More than that, she wished her mother could see her with Heath. No one else in the world would be happier for her.

“Finding anything?” Victoria asked from directly behind her, causing Willow to nearly jump out of her skin.

“Too many things,” Willow responded with a short laugh. “But I’ll only purchase these two.” She pulled out the dresses that had caught her eye and handed them to the seamstress.

“I took the liberty of picking out two shifts for you as well as drawers. Did you decide on how many petticoats?”

“Let’s go with three,” Willow said. If Heath gets rankled by the amount of money I’ve spent, I can return some of the merchandise, can’t I?”

“Yes, that wouldn’t be a problem.”

Willow followed Victoria to the other side of the store. The seamstress walked behind a long counter and folded the clothing meticulously, with expert skill. “You know it’s funny,” she said. “Heath must be looking for someone who is very different from his wife to warm his bed.”

Shocked, Willow said, “What do you mean?” It surprised her that Victoria had guessed the nature of her relationship with Heath, but she supposed it wasn’t too much of a leap. Everything about Willow projected that she was in love, and Heath buying her clothes indicated he had the same feelings for her.

Victoria shrugged. “Only that Rose Wolfe was so sophisticated, and you… Well, I shouldn’t have to pretend that you are too, should I?”

“No,” Willow said, trying not to feel bruised by the comment. Victoria was right, after all. Sophisticated would not be a term to describe Willow, by any stretch of the imagination.

“Sometimes men need to find themselves in the arms of someone different, before finding the next woman to marry. It helps them heal. Most men visit the brothel, but Heath is too upstanding for that, of course.”

Hurt bloomed into a humiliation so great it struck Willow dumb. Before stepping foot in Victoria’s shop, she’d been certain that Heath’s intentions toward her were respectable, even if his love for her had seemed too good to be true. But after hearing the seamstress’s words, doubt niggled its way into her mind.

Victoria didn’t seem to notice or care about Willow’s anguish. She continued to talk, and in doing so, managed to twist the knife she’d so adeptly lodged into Willow’s heart. “I thought when he was ready to move on, he might ask me. Not long ago, he noticed that I was struggling to untie the top of my dress. He got me over to a private place and assisted. I saw in his eyes he wanted to kiss me, but he lost his nerve. I’m not surprised. He was still grieving his dead wife. I must admit I’m surprised he’s courting *you*, but it does make sense when I think about it.”

Willow kept her face expressionless, not wanting to give away how much Victoria had shaken her. She paid for the goods with Heath’s money, but she didn’t plan to keep them.

On the buggy ride home, she silently berated herself for not listening to her own fears. Her gut and her wit had kept her alive in the years since her mother’s death. But like a fool, she’d ignored both and fallen in love. Of course a man like Heath would never want to marry a woman like her. How could she have been so stupid?

Chapter Seventeen

When Willow arrived at the ranch with her bundles of clothes, Heath was still out on the range. She said goodbye to the foreman's daughter who was minding the children, fed the children a quick supper, and then found solitude in her room. She threw the bundles of clothes in a corner of the floor and stripped out of her green dress, adding it to the pile.

Tears streamed down her face as she stepped into her trousers and pulled her work shirt over her head. She scoffed at herself in the mirror as she plaited her loose hair into a braid. She had been many things in life, but a simpering, lovesick fool had never been one of them until recently, and she would never be bamboozled again.

The words she would say to Heath formed in her mind. She needed to end the courtship before he did, thus retaining a modicum of pride. She was heartbroken, but she was also resolved.

Upon hearing the front door to the cabin whine open, Willow squared her shoulders and gritted her teeth, deciding she might as well get what she had to say over with. Heath's footsteps grew louder; he was heading to her room. She opened the door to see him standing there about to knock, his knuckles suspended in the air.

His smile vanished the instant he saw her. He surveyed her appearance. "Willow… Are you not well? I thought you were going to town today."

"I went to town." A surge of anger flowed through her. How dare he use her to make himself feel better about losing his wife?

His eyes searched hers. "And you didn't buy the dresses?"

"They're over there," she answered, waving dismissively toward the pile in the corner.

Heath glanced at the scattered packages and returned his focus to her. "I see. What's the matter?"

Willow looked at his concerned face and steeled herself for what needed to be said. "Nothing is the matter, but I no longer wish for you to court me."

Heath's eyebrows lifted with surprise but then lowered into a scowl. "What happened in town, Willow?"

"Nothing," she lied. "Only I had some time to think, and I don't believe we are right for courtship. I'll continue to work here if it's all the same to you. I would miss the children if I left."

Heath glared at her with such a withering expression, she actually took a step back. He used that opportunity to come into her room. He closed the door behind him without removing his gaze from her face. The door's slam caused her to jump.

"And when did you come to this decision, exactly?"

"After I bought the clothes. But Victoria said it would be no problem to return anything I don't end up wanting. Perhaps you could take all that back next time you go to town. I prefer my current attire anyway." Turning, she walked stiffly to the bed, where she sat. "Now, if you'll excuse me, I need to rest. I'm plumb tuckered out."

"After you bought the clothes," he mused in a thoughtful tone. He looked up to the ceiling and raked his fingers through his hair. He then settled both hands on his hips and looked at the floor, kicking a nonexistent pebble with the tip of his boot.

Willow's belly flipped. Despite her anger toward Heath, her attraction toward him hadn't faded, and seeing him looming there like an angry, wounded bear threatened to disarm her. "Please leave," she said, trying to sound strong, but her words came out as a pathetic whimper.

Heath glowered at her. "I will leave after you tell me what the devil is going on. I'm missing a piece of this puzzle."

"It doesn't matter, Heath. Just go away."

He remained, observing her. When she glanced at his face, she saw that he looked angrier than ever.

"Willow, I'm going to ask you again, and this time I expect an honest answer. What happened in town to make you doubt your love for me, or mine for you?"

Hearing him speak of love caused angry, hurt tears to spring to her eyes. He made no move to comfort her, and instead waited for an explanation.

It was clear he wasn't going to leave unless she gave him the reason for ending the courtship. She supposed it didn't matter if he knew. *He* was the one who should feel ashamed, not her.

She related her conversation with Victoria. She told him that the seamstress's words had made sense to her, since it was odd that out of all the women Heath could court, he'd chosen a troublesome orphan who was nothing like his late wife. "You shouldn't have bedded me," she continued, her anger piquing. "I know I'm not good enough to be your wife. I know I'm only hired help and a charity project you worked out with the marshal, but I'm still a person. I have feelings."

"Anything else?" he asked through gritted teeth.

"No, that's it."

He dropped his hands from his hips. "I listened to you. Now how about you listen to me?"

"Fine," she said. "Talk all you like. It won't change anything."

"We'll see about that." He paced from one side of the room to the other, then stopped abruptly and pointed an accusing finger at her. "I'll have you know, Willow McAllister, that once again you've

aimed your gun and fired before knowing which direction your gun should point."

She knew he referred to her mistaken guess about why the marshal's children had run away. "I didn't have all the facts about the runaways," she argued, "but I have the facts now."

"You don't. You didn't know my Rose, and Victoria Davis didn't know her either. Your whole belief that our courtship is a sham is based on what you think you know about Rose."

"But, but I know she was nothing like me," Willow stammered, disliking the sound of her higher-pitched voice. "She was sophisticated and well-mannered. Of course you want another woman like her, since you loved her so much."

"Yes, she was well-mannered," Heath agreed, "but she was much more than that."

"I don't understand, Heath," Willow said, feeling defeated and more confused than ever.

"No, you don't. That's obvious," he scoffed, "but maybe instead of believing whatever Victoria Davis told you, you should believe what I told you. I told you I love you."

Willow looked out the window, trying hard not to succumb to her tears. She wanted to believe him, but it still didn't make sense to her.

"You are, in many ways, a lot like Rose was," Heath said, his voice softening. "You're surprising and witty, you're kind and nurturing to the children, and until a few minutes ago, I thought you had grown to believe in me. Those are all qualities Rose had, and I value them more than knowing which fork to use at the table."

His words washed over her, giving her hope that she was wrong.

"Your lack of trust hurts me, Willow. I thought we were past that. Remember when you said everyone thinks I'm a gentleman, and I said you know otherwise?"

She nodded, sniffling.

"That's because you know more about me than I choose to share with anyone else. That's what love is, don't you think, when two people know each other intimately?"

Willow could hear the hurt in his voice, and in that moment she understood. If he didn't love her, there was no way she could cause him such pain. Before, Willow hadn't known it was possible to feel ashamed and relieved at once. She couldn't find the words to express both her sorrow and her happiness. She buried her head in her hands.

The only sounds were the wind whistling outside and the ticking of the clock on the wall. Heath said nothing further. She could

feel his gaze on her, disappointed and angry, and she wished she could climb under the covers of the bed and hide there forever.

"I should have known," she said, dropping her hands from her face. "You're not like any other man I know, so why should I think you would prefer a traditional woman? I'm such a fool."

He turned toward the door. "Don't expect me to disagree with that," Heath replied tersely.

"Heath," Willow said, standing from the bed. "Please don't leave. I— I couldn't bear it if you left now."

"You won't like it if I stay. You want me to comfort you, but I only want to punish you."

"I deserve punishment," she said, rushing to him and throwing herself against his chest, which felt as hard and immoveable as a brick wall. Wrapping her arms around him, she said, "Punish me severely, Heath. Only please, please forgive me. Tell me you still love me."

"I still love you, and I will forgive you in time," he said, extricating her arms from around him and gently shoving her back. "Go to bed. We'll talk more later."

"No!" she cried, reaching out to cling to his shirt. "I can tell I've hurt you, and I want to make up for it."

He reached up and wrapped the hair above her nape into his fist. He pulled her head back with a strong tug and glared at her. "First you want me to leave, and now you want me to stay. I'm not inclined to put much stock in what you want today.

"Please," she whimpered, her bottom lip trembling. Tears streamed down her cheeks as she looked into his flashing eyes. "Let me prove I'll never doubt you again. Let me do something, anything. Let me…" An idea came to her. "Let me kiss you, here." She cupped his manhood.

His eyebrows lifted, and he let out a cough. "What?"

She licked her lips and tried to look down, but his grip on her hair was too firm. "You tasted me. I want to taste you."

He closed his eyes and exhaled hard. When he looked at her again, she could see that the anger had drained from his face and his eyes were glinting with lust.

He tugged on her hair, pushing her down. "On your knees then, Trouble," he growled.

She dropped to the rug, putting her at eye level with the bulge in his trousers. He unbuttoned, freeing his cock. Half-hard, it already looked thick and long. A dot of his essence appeared at the head.

Her mouth watered, thinking about gliding her tongue along his length. She was eager to show him how sorry she was. She wanted nothing more to cause him pleasure after she'd so badly hurt him, so she reached up to stroke him.

“Hands behind your back,” he barked, causing her arms to freeze mid-air.

His voice was similar in tone to when he’d taken her over his knee in the barn and spanked her. It wasn’t angry, but it was stern, and it carried her to that submissive state of mind where she was fully accepting of whatever he had in store for her.

She clasped her hands behind her and stared down at the ground, waiting for further instructions. From the corner of her eye, she could see him take himself into his hand.

“Close your eyes,” he ordered.

She obeyed. The sudden darkness set her on edge. When he slapped his cock across her cheek, the sting caused her eyes to fly open, but she quickly shut them again. She welcomed the humiliation. It was like a salve to her ache over having doubted him.

He seemed to understand. He slapped her other cheek with his cock. “Is this what you want, darlin’?”

Her eyes still closed, she said, “Yes, Heath.”

He ran his thumb across her eyelid, down her cheek, and over her lips, pausing after folding her bottom lip down. The touch was tender, and Willow could feel forgiveness in it. She had hurt him, but he knew her and understood why she had felt so untrusting.

“I want to fuck this pretty mouth of yours,” he said, sliding his thumb across the damp underside of her lower lip. “You won’t be able to say any more nonsense to me if your mouth is full of cock.”

She whimpered, both shocked and aroused by his words. It still surprised her to hear Heath using such rough language, when his usual mode was gentlemanly and polite.

“Look at me,” he said, moving his hand to cup her chin.

She opened her eyes and met his. There was love and forgiveness in his gaze. Nothing was more wonderful than being understood and loved despite her flaws.

“This is what I meant about you being surprising,” he said. “Asking to suck my cock like a naughty little vixen. I love this about you. I love everything about you.”

“I know. I’ll never doubt it again, Heath.”

“I hope not.” He released her chin and guided his cock to her lips. Tentatively, she flicked her tongue across the head, tasting him for the first time.

“May I… touch you?” she asked.

He nodded. Now fully hard, his cock looked angry, with engorged purple veins. She unclasped her hands from around her back and reached out to the base, wrapping her fingers around his heat and hardness, causing him to emit a groan. His erection pulsed in her hand.

She touched every bit of him with her fingers, exploring the instrument of pleasure with interest and care. The skin over the iron hardness was surprisingly soft. When she skimmed her thumb over the head, his entire cock flexed and he sucked in a breath.

Holding his cock in her hands, she opened her mouth and guided her lips around him, swirling her tongue as she did, marveling over the taste of sex. She felt so wicked, accepting his manhood into her mouth. His scent brought memories of the intimacies they'd shared that Sunday afternoon in the meadow.

She removed her hands from around his cock so that she could take more of him into her mouth. She braced herself by holding on to him around the back of his knees, feeling the bristled hair around his muscled thighs.

"Oh God," he groaned, lacing his fingers through her hair. He pulled her toward him and held her in place.

For one panicked moment she couldn't breathe. The tip of his cock touched the back of her throat, and she gagged. He let up the pressure on her head and she pulled back enough to stop the feeling of choking. Then she leaned in again carefully, accepting the discomfort of her throat being tickled.

Her effort didn't escape his notice. "My good girl," he said, petting her hair. "You want to please me, don't you?"

She attempted to say yes with a mouth full of cock, but it came out sounding like "*othsh*". It was best to demonstrate, so she slid her lips along his manhood, back and forth, taking as much of him into her mouth as she could. She wanted nothing more than to please him for the rest of her life, and she wanted to show him in every way she could. When she vibrated her tongue along the ridge under the head, his knees buckled briefly and his hold on her hair tightened. He growled an oath.

For the first time since coming to work for Heath, she felt a strange new power. All along, she had felt at his mercy. In every way, he was her better. In age, he was older. In strength, he was more powerful. In wealth, he was richer. But in that moment, on her knees with his cock in her mouth, she realized that in love, none of that mattered. They were two people on fair footing, each with equal ability to please and hurt the other.

Heath's knees began to tremble, and she felt the muscles of his thighs flex. She sped up her movements, knowing he was on the cusp, and continued to suck and lick, trying with everything in her to bring him to that place of ultimate pleasure. Her saliva gathered around the corners of her mouth, and his short grunts of pleasure caused primal heat to flush her body and fill her mind.

While continuing to suck, she glanced up at him. His eyes met

hers and fixed her with a stare of both lust and adoration. He belonged to her, and she to him.

His hips thrust forward, and with a sharp exhale he pulled her from his cock, replacing her mouth with his hand. “Close your eyes, baby,” he grunted.

The moment after she obeyed, his hot seed spurt across her forehead and cheeks. She kept her eyes closed as the sensation of the thick essence coating her face dripped down into the corners of her mouth. She slid her tongue out and lapped at the wetness, tasting the result of his pleasure.

She remained on her knees with her eyes closed, basking in the knowledge that she was a woman who could provide the man she loved with gratification. In that humble pose, she felt like the most beautiful, powerful woman in the world.

She could hear Heath pulling on his trousers and buckling his belt. Shortly after, a damp cloth pressed against her cheek. With thorough strokes, Heath washed her face. He took her hands in his and pulled her to her feet. Wrapping his arms around her, he pulled her close to his chest.

“You forgive me?” she murmured.

“I told you I would.”

“But I sped up the process a little, didn’t I?”

He chuckled. “Yeah, you might have.”

She looked up at him. “I won’t doubt you again, Heath.”

“I’m glad to hear that, darlin’.” He ran his hand over her hair. “You spent some time on your knees. Now it’s my turn.”

Surprised, she said, “No, Heath, I don’t need the pleasure returned. I wanted to—”

“Hush,” he said, holding a finger over her lips. “You have only one thing on your mind, don’t you?” He laughed again as he lowered himself to one knee.

It dawned on her then what he intended to do. She gasped and covered her mouth as he squeezed her other hand.

“I worried that I was making a big mistake by bringing you home,” Heath said, “but it turned out to be one of the best decisions I’ve ever made.”

“Oh, Heath,” she said, her eyes filling with tears.

“I was going to propose later in the week, but I want to make sure you have no more doubt of my intentions, even for a minute. Say you’ll marry me, Willow McAllister.”

“I will. Of course I will!”

He stood and gathered her face in his hands. He kissed her deeply, giving and drawing from the abundance of love they had for each other. When their lips unlocked, he said, “I consider myself lucky

that you've given me your trust. I know you don't give it to many people."

She shook her head. "No, that's true."

"And now that you've agreed to marry me, I feel like the luckiest man in the world."

"I'm the lucky one, Heath."

He winked at her. "Don't forget it, Trouble."

Chapter Eighteen

Heath sat in his armchair with Bitty on his lap. Jack lay sprawled on the sofa, one foot over the arm of the couch, the other one touching the floor. Willow sat in the chair opposite Heath. She had placed her right hand over her left, effectively hiding the band on her left ring finger until they gave the news to the children.

Heath marveled over how different this meeting was compared to the first family meeting with Willow. He no longer had the anxiety over how she and the children would get along. Now she was every bit a part of the family.

Bitty tapped him on the head. “Your hair’s sticking up, Pa.”

“Hey!” he exclaimed, pretending to be offended. “Don’t hit my top-notcher.”

Bitty grinned. “That’s not a top-notcher. That’s your head.”

Heath frowned at her and touched his head. “This is my top-notcher.” He touched his nose. “This is my smell sniffer.” He touched his mustache. “And this is my soup strainer.”

Bitty dissolved into giggles and shook her head. “No! That’s your nose and mustache. I know what they’re called!”

Heath shook his head, in mock dismay. “I don’t know what they’re teaching you in that school.”

Still giggling, Bitty pointed at his mouth. “What’s that, then?”

“That’s my food grinder, of course.”

Jack and Willow grinned at them, as Bitty continued to laugh. “And what’s this?” she asked, pointing at his elbow.

Heath jabbed her in the ribs. “That’s my poker.”

Willow cleared her throat. “That’s not the body part I would call your poker.”

Knowing her reference, Heath choked back a laugh. The children laughed as well, though he was certain they didn’t understand the joke.

“What’s his poker?” Bitty asked.

“Yeah, what is it?” Jack chimed in.

Heath raised an eyebrow at Willow, wondering how she would explain herself to the children.

“Hmm,” she said. Leaning over, she poked Bitty in the tummy. “His finger, of course. It’s a much better poker than an elbow.”

“She’s right,” Jack said, satisfied in her answer. “Hey, you’re wearing jewelry, Miss Willow. You never wear jewelry.”

Willow pulled back her hand quickly and looked as though she would try to hide her hand again. Instead, she held it out for the children to see. “Do you like my new ring?”

“Sure,” Jack said.

Bitty climbed down from Heath's lap and leaned toward Willow to take a closer look. "It's shiny."

"That's a wedding band," Heath said. "Miss Willow and I are getting married."

Bitty gasped and then clapped her hands. "You're going to live here always, Miss Willow?"

Willow smiled serenely. Heath had noticed how much calmer her smiles were since he'd proposed. In general, she was more relaxed, was sitting up straighter, and her old nervous habit of chewing tobacco had been abandoned completely.

Willow pulled Bitty into a hug. "I'll stay forever, as long as you and Jack want me to."

Bitty squeezed her tight. "Yes, please!"

"Jack, what do you say?" Heath asked. "You like the idea of me and Willow getting hitched?"

"Yeah," Jack said. He stood and held out his hand. "Congratulations, Pa."

Heath shook it, then pulled him into a bear hug. "Thank you, son."

Though Heath knew his children loved Willow and would be glad that they were marrying, it was still a relief to give them the news and hear their happiness spoken out loud. He drew a deep breath, inhaling the scent of the pine logs crackling in the fire. It smelled like home, like love and comfort, and he silently thanked the heavens he'd brought Willow to the ranch in spite of his initial reservations.

Willow held out her hand to Jack. "I have to say congratulations to you too, Jack."

Confused, he wrinkled his brow, but he took her proffered hand. "What for?"

"For getting your room back, of course," Willow said. "I'll be moving into your pa's room as soon as we're married."

Jack's face split into a bigger smile. "That's good news."

"Agreed," Heath said. "And the sooner, the better."

Later that week, Willow donned one of her new dresses. It was a blue gingham gown stitched together with navy thread. Pearl buttons dotted the back along her spine. She fashioned her hair into an elaborate braided bun and tied it off with ribbons that matched the pearls.

Heath met her by the buggy and helped her to the seat. "Do me a favor while you're in town, Trouble. Pick up the Sunday paper for

me."

Willow gathered the reins into her hands. It was a cool autumn morning, and she was in jovial spirits. The trips to town were proving a great break from the daily labor of housework, and she especially looked forward to this visit. "Sure, Heath. Anything else you want while I'm there?"

"Only that you don't take too much satisfaction in ordering a wedding dress from Victoria Davis."

"I can't promise you *that*," Willow said. "I must admit there are few tasks I've been more excited about."

He shook his head and grumbled, "I hope you're as excited to marry me as you are to rub it in Victoria's face."

"Marrying you is a close second, darling, don't worry."

Heath laughed, and Willow joined in with him. Then she clucked to the horse and set out. She looked back when she was a ways down the path.

Heath stood in the distance by the cabin, still watching her retreat. He lifted his hand, and she waved back, happiness filling her heart. She had the urge to shout from the rooftops. She wanted every person in town who had ever looked down on her to know that the cream of Thorndale's crop loved her.

But there would be no such grand announcement. Heath had suggested they have a simple ceremony at the chapel in a few weeks' time. Jack and Bitty would be in attendance, and perhaps the marshal and his family. Willow didn't tell Heath she would prefer a large wedding with as many people there as could fit inside the church. She knew it was vanity to wish such a thing, so she dismissed it from her mind. Plus, she reckoned that telling Victoria she was engaged to Heath would be satisfaction enough.

When she arrived at the seamstress's shop, she could barely measure her steps, having the ridiculous impulse to skip through the door and sing the news. The pleasant scent of freshly brewed coffee greeted her as she walked in.

Victoria looked up from where she was hemming a pair of wool trousers by the window. She set them aside and stood. Addressing Willow coolly without a trace of even faux friendliness, she said, "What can I do for you?"

Willow tilted her head and examined Victoria's face. Her cheeks were slowly turning a bright crimson, as though she already knew what Willow was going to announce. But how could she? Willow hadn't been to town since Heath proposed to her, and Heath would have mentioned to Willow if he'd shared the news with Victoria.

"I'm here to request that you sew me a wedding dress," Willow

said, reciting the words she'd practiced and relished a hundred times in anticipation of this moment. "Heath and I are getting married."

Victoria didn't look surprised. "Fine. Come with me."

Confused and a bit let down by the seamstress's bland reaction, Willow followed her to the back of the shop. A newspaper and a catalog were on the counter, along with various bits of fabric and a pot of coffee Victoria likely offered to other people who stopped by. To Willow, Victoria shoved the catalog. "Pick out the design you want and I'll sew it for you."

Willow thumbed through the pages advertising wedding dresses designed in New York. She found it curious that the catalog was out on the counter. It added to what Willow sensed—that Victoria had known Willow was coming and had guessed what she would request.

Soon Willow became engrossed in her task. It didn't take long to find a dress she liked. Made of satin and silk, it was a sheath design that would skim her body and fall straight to the floor below her hips. It looked comfortable, and it seemed like it would require less fabric than some of the other designs.

"I'll take this one," Willow said, pointing to her choice.

Victoria looked at it and nodded her approval. "I'm glad you chose one I won't have trouble making. If you'd chosen one of the ball gowns, my skills might have been tested."

Though for days Willow had looked forward to causing the seamstress some of the same humiliation she'd felt upon last visiting, Willow's desire to hurt the other woman vanished in that moment, replaced by a longing to show her kindness. Willow remembered her own appalling behavior when she'd been unloved and alone. Victoria no doubt felt the same loneliness and had acted out of her own sadness.

"Is there anything else I can do for you?" Victoria asked. Her cheeks were still red, and it was clear she wanted Willow to leave.

Softly, Willow said, "You were wrong about Heath's feelings for me."

"Clearly," Victoria retorted, straightening and lifting her chin in the air. "I'm sure you enjoyed coming in here to request a wedding dress from me, didn't you? Couldn't wait to make me out to be a fool."

"I thought I would take more pleasure from it than I did," Willow admitted, "but I don't want to make you feel bad anymore. I'd like for us to be friends again, like we were as little girls."

Victoria scoffed. "You may have fooled Mr. Wolfe, but I know you're nothing but a thief and troublemaker. Fancy clothes don't change a thing."

Willow drew a deep breath. "Wearing a nice dress didn't change how I acted, but finding love did. I hope you find the same…

and soon, for everyone's sake." She couldn't help but add the barb at the end, rankled by Victoria's continued condescension. Before Willow could say anything worse to the bitter woman, she turned and strode out of the shop.

She headed to the telegraph office, where she planned to purchase the Sunday paper for Heath. Lost in her thoughts about Victoria, she was only dimly aware that the townsfolk ambling along the sidewalk seemed to be acknowledging her more than usual and even smiling at her.

The bell jingled as she entered her destination, and Joseph Kepner greeted her from behind the counter. "Good morning, Miss McAllister," he said, in a much more pleasant voice than he'd used during their previous interactions.

"Howdy, Mr. Kepner. I'm here to buy Sunday's paper." She placed a nickel on the table.

Joseph turned to the stack of papers, picked one from the top, and handed it to her. "You'll find what you're looking for on page three," he said, winking at her.

Willow took the paper and thanked him, though she had no idea what he meant. It wasn't until she arrived at the buggy and sat down that she opened the paper to page three. Her gaze fell immediately to the enlarged, bold words in the center of the page.

Heath Wolfe and Willow McAllister, both of Thorndale, Texas, are pleased to announce their engagement…

Willow let out a squeal of delight. She read the rest of the announcement, which went on to invite all of Thorndale to celebrate their union during a reception after the ceremony.

Happy tears came to her eyes. Heath must have known how much this would mean to her. By placing an announcement in the paper, he was telling the whole town he loved her. And thanks to him, Willow felt totally and completely worthy of his love.

The End

Dear Reader,

Thank you for purchasing *Bringing Trouble Home*. If you enjoyed this book, I invite you to sign up for my newsletter to get future book-release alerts, giveaways, and exclusive excerpts. My newsletter subscribers are the first to know about my book sales and freebies too. Sign up now!

Ready to immerse yourself in the shenanigans happening in Thorndale again? Check out *When He Returns*, book two in the *Lost and Found in Thorndale* series. A sneak peek starts on the next page.

Amelia Smarts

Sneak Peek

When He Returns
Lost and Found in Thorndale, Book 2

Chapter One

Texas, 1891

Wade Hunter watched two boys skip past him. They were plump and rosy around the face, and every perky step projected energy. He could hear them giggling at nothing in particular as far as he could tell—just for the joy of living, it seemed. Leading the two boys was their ma, presumably, whose long skirts and genteel walk gave her the appearance of gliding as she crossed the street toward a buggy next to the mercantile.

When the trio reached their destination, the cowboy next to it swung the kids up one by one, then held his hand out to assist the woman up the steps. Once the man's family was situated, he covered his newly bought goods in the back of the buggy with burlap and secured it with twine for the journey.

Wade's stomach growled, and he felt nauseated. He was a boy not much older than those who'd just walked past him, but he felt decades older. Unlike them, no parent would see to his supper that evening. In fact, he hadn't put a morsel of food in his mouth in nearly two days—not since he'd last stolen from the mercantile.

Standing on unsteady legs, he abandoned his seat by the horse trough and followed the children's path into the dusty street with his saddlebag slung over his shoulder. He covered his nose and mouth with his bandana to mask his appearance as much as possible and coughed a few times from the dirt caught in the unwashed cloth. As the family squeaked away in their buggy, he arrived at the door and leaned flat against the wall next to it.

Wade could hear Mr. Campbell shuffling goods around for some time before all noise ceased. He peeked inside and, upon finding no one in the main room, took action. He rushed in and spotted what he was looking for—sliced bread on the countertop, a free gift for Mr. Campbell's paying customers.

The scent of fresh-baked bread filled his senses. After he

grabbed the entire loaf and stuffed it into his saddlebag, he couldn't resist pulling down the bandana to shove one piece into his mouth. It was at that moment Mr. Campbell entered from the back room and saw him. Fear gripped Wade, and he turned to run, stumbling over a board on the floor that was raised half an inch over the others. He fell against the door, opening it, and scurried down the steps, gripping his saddlebag over his shoulder.

It was as though he was in one of his recurring nightmares. His feet wouldn't run fast enough, and his weakened, hungered state meant that even the rush of fear couldn't provide him with enough strength to escape. Mr. Campbell was upon him in an instant, grabbing him by his collar at the nape of his neck and bringing him to a sudden stop. Desperately, Wade swung his fist, connecting it with the man's side, but it had no effect on the man's grip. Wade's saddlebag was being pulled from his other hand.

"Let it go!" he snarled. The contents of the bag contained all of Wade's earthly belongings. They weren't much—a few matchbooks, a duster, and a knife—but he would fight hard for them.

However, he was in no state to prevent the bag's removal from his person, since he could hardly remain on his feet. His head felt light. His body sagged, and he remained in an upright position only due to the man's firm hold on the collar of his shirt. Dimly aware that he was being dragged in the direction of the marshal's office, he accessed a burst of energy and twisted violently away from his captor. When Mr. Campbell grabbed his shirtsleeve, Wade saw his chance. Like a rabid dog, he sank his teeth into the man's arm and held on for dear life, tasting copper as curses swirled around his head like the dust.

Wade steeled himself in anticipation of the blows that would follow, but despite his teeth being buried in Mr. Campbell's arm, the man did not strike him—nor did he let him go. He continued on toward the jailhouse, dragged Wade up the front steps, and shoved him through the door, where Wade lost his teeth's hold and stumbled backward, falling to the floor. Wade breathed hard as he glared up at the man's bewildered face. The shopkeeper eyed his arm and visibly cringed before looking at the marshal, who had risen from the chair behind his desk and was approaching them.

"What in tarnation, Charles?" the marshal exclaimed. His boots clipped heavily against the floor.

"Caught the boy stealing from the mercantile," Mr. Campbell responded. He held out Wade's saddlebag. "You'll find the stolen bread in there."

"You filthy liar!" Wade growled from his spot on the floor.

The marshal opened the bag and located the bread. "Doesn't

look like he's lying," he informed Wade grimly. He held the loaf out to Mr. Campbell, who shook his head and held up his hands to refuse it.

"It's no good to me now after being inside that dirty bag. Might as well give it to the boy. He's obviously hungry."

The marshal agreed with a nod and, much to Wade's surprise, handed him the loaf. Wade took it slowly, wondering what to make of their act of kindness. It was not what he had expected them to do.

He didn't have the strength or desire to ponder it further and, instead, chose to eat the bread before one of them changed his mind. He devoured it, feeling like an animal. He was aware the men were watching him, but he was too hungry to care until he'd eaten every last bite.

"You'd better get that arm looked at, Charles," the marshal said. "Old Sawbones will dab it with some iodine and wrap it up good."

Charles nodded and cast a glance at Wade, who was still sitting on the ground. "What'll you do with the boy?"

Wade was curious to know the answer to this question as well and turned his full attention to the marshal.

The marshal rubbed the back of his neck. "I'll have to see about finding his folks. Not seen him around these parts. Have you?"

Charles shook his head. "Nope. Good luck, then." He tipped his hat before striding out the door.

Wade's heart hammered in fear. Without hunger to distract him, he was presently in a state to focus fully on his impending punishment, which would be none too lenient judging by the hard look on the marshal's face.

"Stand up, young man," the marshal ordered.

Wade focused on the star pinned to the marshal's chest. "I'd rather sit," he told him, with more courage in his voice than he felt. "This floor is comfortable enough." It was also the only thing protecting his backside, and he wasn't about to abandon it without a fight.

"Suit yourself," the marshal replied, shrugging. He meandered back around his desk. Once seated, he picked up a pencil and scratched it across a piece of paper, ignoring Wade completely.

The longer Wade sat on the floor being ignored, the more disconcerted he felt. The marshal didn't once look at him, and Wade grew restless and thirsty. His throat was dry and scratchy with the dust, and it wasn't long before his cough returned. Wade looked longingly at the basin of water atop a table by the door to the back room. If only there were some way to magically compel the basin to come to him of its own accord…

The marshal cleared his throat, startling Wade. "If you're

thirsty, you can go fetch yourself some water, kid."

His voice held no anger, but still Wade worried about the marshal's motive for urging him to stand. If he moved, would the marshal then take the opportunity to punish him? He shook his head, trying to make sense of his scrambled thoughts intertwined with irrational fears.

To Wade, the marshal looked like a giant. His shoulders were broad and, even though his shirt was fitted loosely, Wade could see that his arms were thick and muscled. He would have no trouble causing serious harm, if he were so inclined.

A shiver cascaded down Wade's spine, and his gaze wandered to the front door. He wondered if the marshal's size might slow him down enough such that Wade could make a run for it and escape. Quickly, he abandoned that idea. He didn't want to risk making things worse.

Watching the marshal from the corner of his eye, Wade slowly rose to his feet before hustling to the basin. The marshal folded his hands in front of him on his desk and observed Wade drinking two full ladles of water and wiping his dripping chin with the back of his hand.

"Can I go now?" Wade asked, returning the ladle to its hook.

"No, of course not."

Wade's spirits deflated and his shoulders stooped. Sighing heavily, he asked, "What're you gonna do to me?"

"That depends on what you have to say. Are you ready to talk now?"

Wade grunted noncommittally.

"Sit," the marshal said, pointing at the chair in front of his desk.

A burst of rebellion shot through Wade. He hated being told what to do and hadn't been burdened with following orders for some time—not since he'd run away from the orphan's home.

"Stand, sit… Make up your mind," he grumbled, even as he walked to the chair. He sat down heavily and crossed his arms, then glared at the big man across from him, attempting to convey more courage than he felt.

A dark, thick brow rose slowly. "You have quite an attitude for someone who's already in trouble."

Wade stared back at him defiantly, determined to hide his fear.

"How old are you?"

Wade knew he couldn't get away with lying by much more than a year or two. He hadn't had a growth spurt yet, and his voice cracked whenever it spontaneously deepened. "Thirteen, I think. Don't know my exact birthday," he answered.

“All right. And where’s your kin?”

“Dead or in prison.”

Wade’s gaze wandered to the wanted posters tacked up on the bulletin board behind the marshal. He remembered when his pa’s face had been on such a sign. That was nearly two years ago. The bounty hunter had come and taken his pa away, and Wade hadn’t seen him since.

The arrest of Wade’s pa meant the loss of his home. Men in suits had swooped in and stripped it of all valuables, leaving Wade penniless in addition to orphaned. Though he missed some aspects of having a home, he didn’t miss his pa. Wade had grown up constantly trying to keep shy of him and his temper, which ignited to dangerous proportions when he drank. Luckily, the home he’d grown up in was large and populated with several servants, so it was easy enough to escape notice during most of his pa’s episodes.

Wade learned that his pa had robbed a bank with a gang of thieves before Wade was born, providing him with a substantial sum of money. While the other men in the gang had continued their thieving ways, Wade’s pa had been smarter. He’d moved across the country, from Virginia to Texas, and waited three years before using the money he’d stolen to build a grand house. Then he’d married an unsuspecting woman and had something resembling a normal family when his wife had given birth to Wade.

Everything changed after her death. His pa became even crueler. And, though his ma hadn’t paid Wade much mind, leaving the child-rearing duties to the servants, she had been an effective buffer when she was alive. The years Wade spent with his pa after his ma’s death were something he tried not to remember. His most prominent feeling then had been fear of getting noticed by his pa while simultaneously craving his attention.

The marshal regarded Wade with a curious expression after his short explanation that his kin were either dead or in prison. “Where are you living then, if you have no kinfolk?”

“Nowhere particular.” Wade sat up a little straighter. “I’m a traveling man.”

“A traveling child, you mean,” the marshal corrected.

Wade scowled in response, annoyed by the marshal’s clarification.

“You don’t have any home? Didn’t you get placed with other orphans when you lost your family?”

“They tried,” Wade said, jutting out his chin. “Didn’t much like it, so I ran away. And you can do with me what you will, but I’m not going back. If you force me, I’ll only run away again.” Anger and fierce determination seeped out of his words.

"I see." The marshal set down his pencil and leaned back in his chair. "That puts me in a bit of a predicament, kid."

"How?" Wade asked. He failed to see how the *marshal* was in any kind of predicament at all. Wade was the one about to get punished for stealing.

The marshal scrubbed a hand around his face. "Well, usually if a boy gets into a peck of trouble like you have, I read him the riot act, but then I take him home. Obviously, I can't do that with you."

"You could let me go," Wade suggested. "Nothing all that bad happened. Not like I stole money or anything."

"I could, yes," the marshal allowed, "but that would be irresponsible of me, don't you think?"

Wade's irritation grew. He didn't like being in suspense over his fate. He rose from his chair. "Look, Marshal, I'm sorry I stole the bread. I was hungry. Just give me a seeing-to and be done with it. I'll move on and won't steal again. Wasn't planning on staying in this two-horse town anyway. I got better places to be."

"Sit your ass down," the marshal ordered, more sharply than he had spoken previously.

The harsh edge to the marshal's voice caused Wade to obey immediately. He glared at him, now fearful once again in addition to being annoyed.

"Believe it or not, I *am* giving you a seeing-to, just not the kind you expect," the marshal explained, a bit more gently. "You are a child without a home. I don't think it would be wise to put you back on the streets where you more than likely will steal again, either here or in the next town."

Wade's hands formed into fists, and his heartbeat quickened with the news that the marshal had no intention of letting him go.

The marshal must have seen the fear in his expression. "I'm not going to punish you, if that's what you're worried about. I'm not in the habit of beating starving children."

Wade let out a breath he hadn't realized he'd been holding. Life had afforded him few mercies, and he certainly hadn't expected mercy at the hands of the severe-looking lawman.

"I have five kids at home," the marshal said. "The oldest is just a year or so younger than you."

Wade stared down at the faded denim covering his knees. He failed to understand the marshal's reason for telling him about his kids.

As though reading his mind, the marshal said, "I'm lenient with children, as I have a whole brood of them at home. I believe children should be given second chances, and third, fourth, and fifth chances too."

Wade gritted his teeth. He would never admit it to anyone, but the jealously he felt for boys and girls with parents was sometimes so painful he could hardly bear it. The nausea from earlier turned his stomach once again. “Good for you and your kids,” Wade mumbled resentfully.

“Were your parents good to you before you lost them?” the marshal asked.

The frank question took Wade aback, and it immediately made him defensive. “Of course they were,” he lied. “Why would you ask that?”

“I’m trying to get a read on you. You’re very angry, it seems, and I know for a fact that not all parents are kind to their children. You wouldn’t be the first boy I’ve met who was unfortunate in that regard and who acted angry on account of it.”

“You don’t know anything about me or my parents,” Wade spat, and turned his head to study the bare wall. He was alarmed to feel tears prickling his eyes, and he prayed the marshal didn’t notice. Wade never cried, not even when he’d dislocated his shoulder or when his ma had died of typhoid or when he’d been made an example of at the orphanage. Wade couldn’t understand why the marshal’s words had inspired such emotion.

“Right.” The marshal cleared his throat. “You have two choices. You can either stay the night in the cell back there,” he said, jabbing a thumb toward the door behind him, “or you can stay the night at my house. I have an extra cot you can use if you want to stay at my place.”

Wade’s gaze snapped to the marshal’s eyes. “You said you weren’t going to punish me. What do you call throwing me in jail?”

“I call it keeping you safe and out of trouble.” His expression was implacable, and Wade could see that the man’s mind was made up.

He wouldn’t admit it, but a small part of him felt pleased by the marshal’s invitation to his house. The marshal was the first person Wade could remember who wasn’t treating him as an annoyance to be cast aside.

“Guess I’ll go home with you, if those are my only two choices,” Wade mumbled.

“Jolly good,” the marshal said, standing. He walked around the desk and stared down at Wade. His eyes grew hard as he issued a warning. “You behave yourself at my house. No stealing, no brawling, no disrespect. That clear?”

Wade swallowed. “Yeah.”

The marshal held out his hand to shake on it. “That’s ‘yes, Mr. Shaw’ or ‘yes, Clyde’ will be fine too.”

Wade placed his hand in the marshal's. "Yes, Mr. Shaw."

For the first time, Clyde smiled, which caused the last of Wade's fear to fade away. "And what's your name, son?"

"Wade Hunter."

"All right then, Wade Hunter. Come along. I'll introduce you to my family."

Chapter Two

Wade followed Clyde through the front door of a small house, tightening his grip around the strap of his saddlebag as he did. It was dark and stuffy inside, and it took some time for his eyes to adjust. He heard the children before he saw them.

"Pa, you're home!" a young female voice exclaimed with glee. Rapid, soft footsteps padded across the floor, and a tiny girl in pigtails came to a stop in front of Clyde.

"Hello, darlin'," Clyde said, giving one of her braids a tug. "I've got someone to introduce you to. Say hello to Wade."

The little girl focused wide eyes on the stranger. "Hello."

"This here is Ada," Clyde told him. "She's the youngest."

"Hi," Wade said to her.

Clyde introduced the rest of his children. Sadie was the oldest, a girl of twelve, and Grace was closest to her in age at ten years old. There were twin boys who were nine—Miles and Luke, who looked nothing alike. And finally, there was Ada, the youngest, who was not yet five.

Wade found the whole exchange dizzying. The house was dark and crowded, and he longed to escape, or at least open the windows. The children were gathered around him tightly and stared at him without censor.

"Wade is going to be staying with us tonight," Clyde informed his children.

"Why does he have to stay here?" Sadie demanded.

Judging by the look on Clyde's face, he didn't appreciate his eldest daughter's question. "Because he needs a place to stay, and this is better than the jail. I expect you all to make him feel welcome."

"You can have my peppermint, Wade," Ada said cheerfully, holding out a half-eaten stick of candy in her grubby palm.

By habit, Wade accepted. He hadn't had the luxury of rejecting food for some time, even food from a dirty child who had already dampened it with her saliva. "Thanks." He held the peppermint between his thumb and forefinger, wondering if there was a bucket of water nearby where he could wash it off before eating it.

The tiny child stared up at him expectantly, and something in

Wade's heart constricted. Twice in the span of an hour he'd been shown kindness—first by the marshal and now by the marshal's daughter—and though he didn't exactly like what either of them had offered him, he couldn't deny the good feelings the gestures gave him.

Wade spotted a pitcher over on a table near the fire. "This candy looked delicious. I'm going to rinse it off before eating it," he told Ada.

She cocked her head. "Why you gonna do that, Wade?"

Wade bit back his thoughts. *Because you're dirty and a strand of your greasy hair is stuck to it.* "Um, 'cause that's what you're supposed to do. Haven't you ever heard that water makes candy taste better?" Wade asked.

It was ridiculous, Wade realized, that he could find something as harmless as a child's hair and saliva disgusting, when he'd been sleeping for three nights in a livery next to horse manure. But, not too long ago, he'd been accustomed to a much higher standard of living, and he couldn't successfully block all his thoughts about cleanliness.

Ada stared with curiosity and awe as he walked over to the table. Clyde chuckled behind him, and Wade was relieved that Clyde wasn't offended by the white lie he'd told his daughter.

Wade rinsed off the peppermint and popped it in his mouth. "Mmm, delicious," he said to Ada. "Thanks very much."

"I wanna try!" she exclaimed, digging into the front pocket of her frock. She fished out another peppermint stick along with various other items—a bottle cap, a penny, and what appeared to be a dead insect of some kind. After stuffing the rest of her treasures back in her pocket, she held the sticky candy out to Wade.

He obliged and rinsed it in the same way he had rinsed the last candy. When Ada tasted it, she exclaimed, "You're right, Wade! It's much more deliciouser!"

Wade couldn't help but grin before he glanced at Clyde sheepishly. The marshal's eyes twinkled with amusement. He seemed to be a completely different person from the strict man in the jailhouse.

The marshal's daughter Sadie was far from amused. In fact, from the aggression in her tone, it was evident she was downright angry. "Now Ada will insist on always pouring water over her candy before she eats it."

"Ah well, darlin'," Clyde said good-naturedly. "There are worse things she could be doing."

"That's the trouble," Sadie snapped. "She won't be doing it. *I* will, just like I do everything else. If I let her rinse her own candy, she'll spill the whole pitcher and break it." She stalked out of the house, slamming the door behind her.

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About Amelia Smarts

Amelia Smarts is a *USA Today* bestselling author who writes kinky romance novels containing domestic discipline, spanking, and Dominance/submission. Usually her stories involve a cowboy, and they always involve a man's firm hand connecting with a woman's naughty backside. Amelia holds graduate and undergraduate degrees in creative writing and English. She loves to read, which allows her writing to be influenced by many different genres in addition to romance, including mystery, adventure, history, and suspense.

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- Runner-up: Best Historical Western Romance (*Claimed by the Mountain Man*) in the Spanking Romance Reviews Reader's Poll

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